



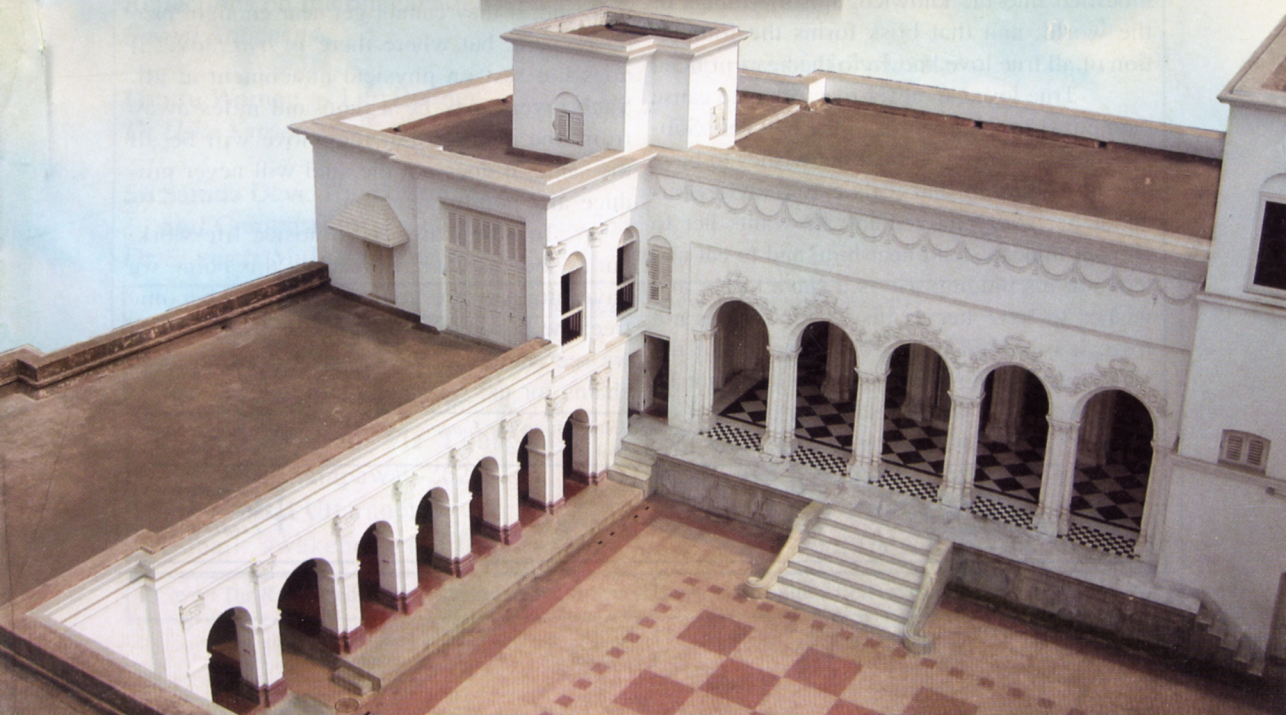
PRABUDDHA BHARATA

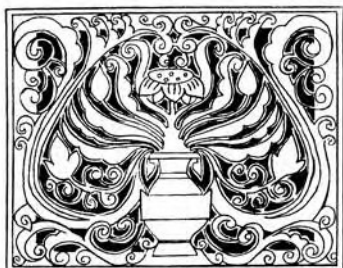
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A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order
Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

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Cover: The Renovated Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre; inset: Swamiji's Birthplace

NEW PRESIDENT OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MATH & RAMAKRISHNA MISSION



It is with great pleasure that we record the election of Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj as President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Math and the Governing Body of the Mission held on 25 May 2005. He is the fourteenth President of the Order.

Swami Gahananandaji was one of the Vice Presidents of the Math and Mission since 14 April 1992, and succeeds Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, who attained mahasamadhi on 25 April 2005.

Born in the village of Paharpur in Sylhet district (now in Bangladesh) in October 1916, Swami Gahananandaji studied the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda during his student life,

and was deeply attracted towards them. He was also greatly influenced by the dedicated lives of some of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, especially the late Swami Prabhanandaji (Ketaki Maharaj), who was his cousin in pre-monastic life. He had also once met Swami Abhedanandaji Maharaj, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Gahananandaji joined the Ramakrishna Order at its Bhubaneswar centre in January 1939 at the age of twenty-two and received mantra diksha from Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj, the then President of the Order, after two months. In 1944 Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj gave him brahmacharya vows and the name Amritachaitanya, and in 1948 sannayasa vows and the name Gahanananda.

At Bhubaneswar, he worked under the inspiring guidance of Swami Nirvananandaji Maharaj (later a Vice President of the Order). He also got opportunity to serve Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj (later the seventh President of the Order) and Swami Achalanandaji Maharaj (a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and a Vice President of the Order) when they visited Bhubaneswar and Puri. From 1942 to 1952 he served at the Kolkata branch of Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati. In the course of those ten years, he went to the Mayavati ashrama in the Himalayas a couple of times to stay in solitude and spend time in study and meditation.

Between 1953 and 1958, he was at the Shillong centre, where he worked under the guidance of Swami Saumyanandaji Maharaj (a disciple of Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj). During this period he also orga-

nized flood relief operations in Assam a couple of times. Keenly interested as he was in the service of sick people, Swami Gahananandaji was posted to the Mission's hospital centre, Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan, Kolkata, in 1958. For twenty-seven long years, he was deeply involved in all its activities as an Assistant Secretary under the inspiring guidance of its founder secretary Swami Dayanandaji Maharaj during the first five years, and then onwards as its head for twenty-two years, till 1985.

The Seva Pratishthan was originally started, and was known for several years, only as a model maternity and child welfare centre. The vast and multifaceted form that the centre assumed in later years was largely achieved under the stewardship of Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj. He worked tirelessly to develop and expand its services to cater to the medical needs of more and more people belonging to poor and low-income sections of society. During his stay there, he started health-care activities in thirty-three remote villages through mobile medical units, free eye-operation camps in nearby villages, and medical relief for Gangasagar Mela pilgrims every year. He also organized medical-relief work for the refugees during the 1971 Bangladesh war.

Swami Gahananandaji was elected a Trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a Member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1965. In 1979 he was appointed an Assistant Secretary of the twin organizations. Even after that, he continued to shoulder the responsibilities of the Seva Pratishthan as its Secretary till March 1985. Thereafter he came to the headquarters at Belur Math to function as a whole-time Assistant Secretary. He became the General Secretary of the Math and Mission in 1989 and continued in that post for three years till 1992, when he became a Vice President of



the Order. From that time he was also simultaneously the head of Ramakrishna Math (Yogodyan) in Kankurgachhi, Kolkata.

As a Vice President, Swami Gahananandaji travelled extensively in various parts of the country and visited many branches of the Math and Mission and also a number of unaffiliated centres. In 1993 he represented the Ramakrishna Order at the commemorative function organized by Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (and attended by 6,500 people from all parts of the world) to celebrate the centenary of the 1893 Parliament of Religions where Swami Vivekananda made his historic appearance. During that time he also visited the centres of the Order in the US and Canada. He also visited at different times various places in the UK, France, Switzerland, Holland, Russia, Australia, Japan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia and Mauritius.

In all these places, Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj spread the message of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, and also gave mantra diksha to thousands of spiritual seekers. He always responded to requests for spiritual guidance from all corners of the country, including very remote villages, ignoring his personal difficulties and inconveniences.

We earnestly pray for the continued fruition of his spiritual ministrations and steady growth of the activities of the Order under his guidance.



उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत ।

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

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JULY 2005

No. 7

❧ Traditional Wisdom ❧

VOICE OF THE *BRAHMAVĀDINĪ*

I walk with the Rudras and the Vasus,
I, with the Adityas and all the gods;
I bear up the two, Mitra and Varuna,
I, Indra and Agni, I, the two Ashvins.

I am the Empress of the universe, the bestower of riches,
I was the first to know among the holy ones;
Me the gods put in many places,
Making me enter and dwell abundantly. (Vak)

Whatsoever thing I do of toil,
Burdens of completion on me lie;
Yet unto another falls the spoil
And gains he the fruit thereof, not I.

Yet if I toil with no thought of self,
All my works before the Self I lay:
Setting faith and duty before pelf,
Well for me shall be the onward way. (Lalla)

O Govinda, we adore Thee this early dawn but for one boon: let us always, even unto our seventh birth be with Thee, serving Thy will alone! Change all other desires in us into this unique aspiration: to be Thy humble servitors! (Andal)

O hear me! I am blissful having espoused the bodiless, speechless, and homeless husband. I therefore do not crave for anything more. Nor do I in future aspire for any happiness that is piecemeal. (Akka Mahadevi)

Remember, the beauty of a woman is not enhanced through clothes and cosmetics, but through physical and mental purity. (Gauri Ma)

∞ This Month ∞

The editorial, **Bridging the Gender Divide**, places in perspective the essays on women's issues that feature in this number.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago recapitulates the problem of 'Matrimonial Expenses of Hindu Girls'—a problem which, though much attenuated, is yet to lose its relevance in Indian society.

In his **Reflections on the Bhagavadgita** this month, Swami Atulanandaji takes up verses twelve to sixteen of Chapter Twelve containing Sri Krishna's enumeration of the attributes of an ideal devotee.

Hindu Woman as Life Partner is a lucid representation of the Hindu ideal of married womanhood as obtained in the Vedas and Dharmashastras. It highlights the egalitarian approach to gender and women's rights and also elucidates the concept of *pātivratya*. The author, Dr Usha Kapoor, is Principal, Guru Nanak Dev University College, Jalandhar. She is a specialist in public administration and has worked on voluntary agencies for women's welfare.

Feminists across the globe have been highlighting the politics of dominance and subjugation that have deprived women of control over their lives and activity. **Sri Sarada Devi: The Power of Love and Compassion** is a refreshing relook at the concepts of peace, power and being as they appear in the life of Sri Sarada Devi, offering fresh feminist paradigms. Dr Sreemati Mukherjee, the author, is Head of the Department of English, Basanti Devi College, Kolkata.

In her article **Devotion as Counter-marginality: Some Indian Women Models**, K S

Sunita examines the role of devotion in the lives of several women who occupy a prominent place in Indian history. The author is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

Steps to Women's Empowerment is a graphic narration of the way in which Rama-krishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi, is facilitating the socio-economic empowerment of the tribal women of Jharkhand, besides helping them manifest their inherent spiritual strength as envisaged by Swami Vivekananda. The author, Swami Shashankanandaji, is Secretary of the Ashrama.

In the second half of his essay, **The Prose Style of Swami Vivekananda**, Prof. U S Rukhaiyar draws our attention to the felicitous use of figures of speech and poetic imagery, the powerful application of rhetorical tools and the skilful creation of harmonious sound effects that characterize Swamiji's prose. The author, lately deceased, was former Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Jai Prakash University, Chapra.

Dr Gordon Stavig, a researcher from Hollywood, has retrieved a report of Swami Vivekananda's talk at the V Club, 'Had No Meats at the Dinner', from the electronic archives of the *New York Times*. This we present in **A New York Times Report on Swamiji**.

Rani Ahalyabai's piety, courage, fortitude and generosity are as legendary as is her administrative acumen and sense of justice and equity. In creating a welfare state in Malwa, braving personal tragedies and external odds, she exemplified genuine karma yoga. She is the subject of this month's **Glimpses of Holy Lives**.

Bridging the Gender Divide

EDITORIAL

I am Vrinda

As I held my newly born granddaughter in my arms, my mind was thrown back several decades to a time when I myself was a curious toddler trying to make sense of all that the many women in our joint family affectionately tried to put into my little head. Someone had just commented that the baby looked just like me and that opened a floodgate of memories.

A small frock had been bought for my second birthday, and my brother Hari, just a year older than me, was given a shirt. I liked the shirt better than the frock, but my mother said that I was a girl, and that girls wore frocks. It had never occurred to me that something set my brother and me irrevocably apart, for we were very fond of each other. But I was a sharp child, and in no time was out telling others which—tables, chairs and all—was a boy and which a girl, much to the amusement of my aunts!

Once I started going to school at the age of five, things took a more concrete shape. Boys would join together for their games, and we girls had our own. Things just seemed to sort themselves out that way. We girls preferred hide-and-seek while the boys would pitch in for cops-and-thieves. At times I did feel like joining my brother's friends at their games, but then backed out for fear of being singled out; the boys were, after all, more rough-and-tumble. At home too, mother would prefer to have me by her, even as my brother would spend a lot of time out, playing with the neighbours. I did not mind, for I loved helping my mother with the household chores; and when my younger brothers arrived, taking care of them was great fun.

Adolescence only deepened the mystery

of this gender divide. Boys (in those days you became men and women only after marriage, and to elders at home you always remained a child) now did appear to be different; and that not simply because of obvious physical contrasts. It would be difficult for me, even now, to spell out these differences. Maybe it had something to do with our emotions and affects, our cares and concerns. The boys were more outgoing, competitive; and, though the joint family did not allow for the display of such attitudes, they could also be more individualistic, and probably a bit aggressive too. Sharing, caring and nurturing seemed to come naturally to women. Yet, as individuals, is not each of us prone to the whole range of these attitudes and dispositions? Is this divide really natural?

My marriage was arranged for when I was seventeen. I had done well at school and had a special aptitude for mathematics. I would have loved to pursue the subject, but such a course was simply not realistic in our small, out-of-the-way town. The few girls who went to college studied home science. Besides, with six children to be schooled, my father could hardly afford to invest heavily on his daughters' education. The thought of their marriage expenses itself weighed heavily on him, and we daughters well understood his anxiety.

Life at my in-laws was patterned on the lines of our own joint family; I suppose this held good for most families. The only difference was that I was now in the role that my mother played when I was young. A daughter-in-law in a joint family would be busy throughout the day. The relatives, the children, the milch cattle—all called for attention. The busyness spiced the monotony and left lit-

tle time for reflection on the drudgery that a woman's life can be. The regular round of pujas, festivals, *kathas* and celebrations brightened up our lives. Children were born, and grew up, as a matter of course. Sons of course were cause for special celebrations; and too many daughters could occasion one to lose the love of one's husband and family, causing us daughters-in-law no little anxiety.

Women trail their daughters all their lives, at least mentally if not physically. My daughter Gauri has lived a tempestuous life, and I have always been concerned about her. She has been a non-conformist all along, true to her times; or is my thinking simply a reflection of the eternally recurring generation gap that keeps confounding elders? Gauri, to me, is more a son than a daughter. She has a mind of her own, right from matters of dress to choice of career. All my daughters have had good college education, but Gauri alone insisted on pursuing a professional career; she would not remain a servile housewife, she insisted. Her marriage was by choice, but it has hardly been as happy as the arranged marriages of my own times. The 'double shift'—office and home—probably tells on her nerves. Her office is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and the condescension of her male colleagues annoys her. The exclusively male shop floor also resents intrusions from a female supervisor. Her husband was not used to household chores prior to marriage, and he is not much of a help to Gauri at home. This often leads to friction. To top it all, he is not at all keen on having daughters, and almost convinced Gauri to have her pregnancy terminated once they learnt that a second daughter was on her way.

This granddaughter of mine, then, had all but gone missing. As I look into her wistful eyes, I can only hope that her parents and society will realize her value when she grows up to give abundantly of herself, and that she will never have occasion to regret her parents' decision to allow her this life.

The Making of Gender

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the word *male* as 'belonging to the sex that does not give birth to babies', and *female* to that which can. Sex, then, is linked with reproductive function, and is therefore biologically determined. Gender is defined by the same dictionary as 'the state of being male or female', but a lengthy, boxed note suggests that there is much more to gender than what is revealed by the above definition. It begins with the announcement: 'When you are writing or speaking English it is important to use language that includes both men and women equally. Some people may be very offended if you do not.' Gender is not simply a given fact, determined by biology; rather it refers to behaviour that is socially and culturally acknowledged as appropriate (as masculine or feminine) within a given society, at a given time.

Sex is genetically determined—the presence of a Y chromosome results in male anatomy. This process in turn is mediated through hormones and other chemicals. The primary effect of this translation of genetic information is on the structure of the genitalia, and later, at puberty, in the manifestation of secondary sexual characteristics—facial hair, prominent breasts, and so on. This process can go awry at a lot of points leading to sexual ambiguity, but in general most humans can be clearly categorized as male or female.

Gender, though based primarily on biological sex, can have a wide range of meanings and connotations depending on the cultural, social and institutional structures that go to define it and determine its experiential nature. Thus femininity for Vrinda was not exactly what it was for Gauri. Even for Vrinda, the notion of being a woman was constantly changing—from her pre-adolescence days, through marriage, to being a grandmother—and even in her advanced age she could hardly pinpoint what it really meant to be a woman. There are also marked cross-cultural variations in gen-

der conceptions. What it means to be a man or a woman in the US or in France is quite different from what it means in Japan or in Ghana. Gender notions also change significantly with time. The *phirangi memsahib* of pre-Independence India would have appeared much more masculine to the 'natives' than a contemporary British lady would to a Mumbai girl.

Gender is about attitudes, thinking, and behaviour; and these in turn are heavily influenced by society and culture. What Vrinda would wear or how she would marry was culturally predetermined. If Gauri was having problems on the shop floor, that was because she was trying to enter an exclusively male preserve. Terms like 'male nurse' testify to the highly gendered nature of many professions. The stereotype of the breadwinner husband and homemaker wife is still largely true and sets the tone for gender divisions within the family. The hugely popular fashion industry thrives on the never-ending desire of men and women to conform their body image to ever-changing and abstract ideals of masculinity and femininity.

Gender Discrimination

Sociologists have long noted the fact that virtually every society known to history has been based on assumptions of gender difference and has been marked by male dominance. Biological and evolutionary explanations have been offered to account for this fact. Male sex hormones make for bulkier musculature and facilitate aggressive behaviour, thus accounting for the dominance. According to evolutionists, the female of a species survived being selected out by acquiescing in this dominance and maintaining high fertility rates.

Unfortunately, these biological theories smack of chauvinism, for even in highly evolved human societies, where natural or sexual selection has ceased to be an important determinant of evolution, gender discrimination is rampant and has been causing untold suffering to innumerable women across all

sections of society. Gender discrimination, therefore, has more to do with politics than with biology. Researchers routinely come up with findings that reveal differences in brain structure and function between the sexes. For instance, male brains tend to be larger; boys tend to do better in spatial reasoning while girls outperform boys in verbal skills; boys' eyes tend to be more perceptive of motion while girls' of colour and texture. But none of these differences make for superiority. If women have not been able to make an impact in a whole range of activities it is simply because society has stacked the odds heavily against them. For example, engineering is largely male-dominated because factories and workshops are taken to be 'natural' male domains and, research in these areas being 'exciting', attracts male students. As a direct consequence, mathematics and the physical sciences—the basic prerequisites for engineering—have been dominated by men students. So when men outperform women in tests of mathematical aptitude, it probably reflects the lack of sufficient opportunity for girls to develop their mathematical skills rather than any inherent biological limitation. Even in such an 'obviously masculine' domain as athletics, with proper training, women are able to achieve performance levels that excel most men.

Women's history, where it does exist (for history writing itself has largely been a patriarchal business), is a history of subordination and suppression. Women have been looked down upon as weak, irrational, and fickle. Such thinking justified their exclusion from public affairs and confinement to the domestic sphere. They were supposed to be obedient and subservient to other male members of the family. Their movements were restricted and they had very limited right to property. Unchaste women faced harsh punishment from religious authorities, while unchastity in men was overlooked. Even as late as the end of the nineteenth century, in parts of Germany a hus-

band could legally sell his wife; the minimum legal age of marriage in Britain was raised to sixteen only in 1929, and that too as a reaction to the Sarada Act of the Indian Legislature; and British women had to prove their utility during World War I to gain suffrage rights in 1918. Girls' access to education still remains limited in many parts of the developing world, including India.

There has been a significant improvement in the position of women in India over the last one hundred years. Not only does the Indian Constitution guarantee equal rights to women, but legislative steps have been taken at frequent intervals to ensure that they are actually able to access their rights. Yet the ground realities of women's lives still leave a lot to be desired and many more changes are required if gender parity and justice are to be truly realized. The relatively poor nutritional status of Indian women, high maternal and infant mortality rates, selective abortion of female fetuses leading to a reversal of the sex ratio, gender disparities in wages and emoluments, discrimination against women at the workplace, domestic violence and sexual harassment are all too common for women to feel genuinely safe, contented and fulfilled.

The mass media is an important purveyor of stereotypes, and the Indian mass media has been more active in strengthening negative stereotypes than in ushering in change. Communications specialist Kiran Prasad points out that though newspapers do cover women's problems,

this coverage is very limited with the rest of the space occupied by cinema actresses, models, video jockeys (*veejays*) and their hobbies. Many of the women's magazines are devoted to fashion, glamour, beauty ads and aids, weight reduction, cookery and how to sharpen 'feminine instincts' to keep men and their in-laws happy. There are very few articles on career opportunities, health awareness, entrepreneurship, legal aid, counselling services, childcare services and financial management. Print media must focus on women achievers in diverse fields to inspire

young girls and women and there is no dearth of such great women in our country.¹

Narrowing the Gender Divide

If gender is about attitudes and behaviour, it is these areas that need to be addressed if we wish to pave the way for more equitable gender relations in society.

Men's Attitudes

As it has been men who have played the dominant role in perpetuating discrimination, it is they who need to question their attitudes first. They need to realize that 'there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly only on one wing.'² And the first thing that men need to do to advance the cause of women is to allow them liberty. Swami Vivekananda's exhortation over a hundred years ago is still pertinent: 'Liberty is the first condition of growth. It is wrong, a thousand times wrong, if any of you dares to say, "I will work out the salvation of this woman or child." ... Who are you to solve women's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off! They will solve their own problems' (3.246). If any proactive effort is needed, that should solely be to ensure that women can access their fundamental rights. In Swamiji's words: 'Our right to interference is limited entirely to giving education. Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. No one can or ought to do this for them. And our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world' (5.229-30). The dilly-dallying in Parliament over the Women's Bill ensuring reservation of electoral seats for women is a sad indicator of the fact that men can be very loath to relinquish authority and grant women their due.

At a personal level, to be able to empathize with women and the women's cause, men need to be in touch with the feminine

components of their own selves. Preoccupied with dominance, aggression, and individualism—traits that are seen as masculine—men often forget that as social beings they have to perforce practice caring, sharing and empathy—traits that are perceived as feminine. The *Devi Mahatmya* asserts that the Devi exists in all beings as mother (*yā devī sarvabhūteṣu mātṛ-rūpeṇa samīsthitā*).³ Hence men too need to be aware of and manifest their own ‘mother’s heart’.

Women’s Attitudes

The Tantras speak of the Divine Mother as Shakti, and women, as manifestations of this Shakti, are embodiments of Power. It is this inherent power that women need to be aware of if they are to free themselves from subjugating influences. Men talk about empowering women, but women certainly cannot afford to be empowered—they need to *manifest power* instead. Again, this power need not be aggressive or destructive. In speaking of Sita, Savitri and Damayanti as the Indian ideals of womanhood, Swamiji pointed to their heroic fortitude, quiet courage, and a sense of personal dignity that precluded bitterness in the face of adversity and helped them overcome tremendous odds. The Puranic origin of these characters does not make them anachronistic in the least. As archetypal ideals they have eternal relevance. To relate to them is to draw power from our own being which they inhabit. History testifies to the fact that this ‘women’s power’ has been valid in multifarious contexts. In Swamiji’s words: ‘Women in statesmanship, managing territories, governing countries, even making war, have proved themselves equal to men—if not superior. In India I have no doubt of that. Whenever they had the opportunity, they have proved that they have as much ability as men, with this advantage—that they seldom degenerate.’⁴ We need to rethink our conventional notions of power if we are to ap-

preciate the power and authority that a Sarada Devi exercised, as is suggested by Dr Sreemati Mukherjee in her article in this issue.

Swami Shashankanandaji’s narrative, ‘Steps to Women’s Empowerment’ calls attention to the fact how, with a minimum of institutional support, women can organize themselves to better their own socio-economic status without undermining their cultural and spiritual value systems.

The Vedic Spirit

Dr Usha Kapoor’s essay, ‘Hindu Woman as Life Partner’, highlights the egalitarian attitude to gender suffusing the Vedic texts. Vedic women underwent education on the same footing as men—often together, under one guru. They enjoyed freedom in their movements and matrimonial choices. They were expected to be queens (*sāmrajñī*) of the household—exercising benevolent authority, were indispensable participants in sacrificial rituals, and had a forceful voice in public affairs. The erudition and insight of the *brahmadāśinīs*—the Gargis and Maitreyis—was the true source of their power. In prophesying the birth of many such ‘Gargis and Maitreyis’ in modern India, Swamiji was foreseeing the genuine realization of their innate potential by Indian women. Women need to recapture the Vedic spirit, not as an atavistic vestige but as the free-flowing dynamism that makes for the eternal relevance of the Vedas. This would be the pathway to a genuinely gender-just Indian society.

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2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 6.328.
3. *Devi Mahatmya*, 5.71.
4. CW, 9.201.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

July 1905

The Matrimonial Expenses of Hindu Girls

Of the cankers in our society, it is our object to-day to deal with one of the greatest of them—the marriage expenses of Hindu girls. The marriage of a Hindu maid of the high castes at present has been a stupendous difficulty. The value of a bridegroom is in direct ratio to his qualifications, innate and acquired, physical and mental. The girl's marriage often makes her father or guardian poorer by a few thousand rupees. It is superfluous to say how hard it is in these days of keen competition in India to make a saving of a few thousand rupees. When such a saving is effected, it requires not infrequently a lifetime. So, just fancy what a man amasses in his life is swallowed up in a single girl's nuptial ceremony! ... No wonder that property has been mortgaged or sold for debts incurred by a girl's parent, or he has been reduced to dire penury and even beggary.

Again, a high caste Hindu woman can under no circumstances remarry, whereas a man can take at a time as many wives as he likes. The wife's relatives try by all means in their power to please the husband's party. Indeed the attitude of the latter towards the former is somewhat akin to the relation obtaining between the rulers and the ruled. If he seeks the well-being of his child (who does not?), the bride's warden is expected to meet all demands emanating from the other party....

If the bridegroom's party cannot be satisfied, they generally vent their ire on the newly wedded bride. She, a poor creature of hardly 14 summers, has to bear the brunt. She is subjected to diverse sorts of domestic oppression. And alas! such treatment from her consort or his relations has not rarely culminated in suicide.

Now, the disease having been described, wherein lie the remedies? The first and perhaps the most important of them is that the galling restrictions prevailing against Hindu intermarriage should be very much relaxed. Only certain sections of each caste are permitted to intermarry in their respective spheres. Now if one division of a certain caste can be given in marriage to a member of all the other sections, it follows that marriage will be easier, which will necessarily result in lessening the expenses.

Another remedy is that the marriageable age of girls should be enhanced. In our opinion the minimum age should be 16 years which is also the age contemplated by the Civil Marriage Act (Act III of 1872). This being an accomplished fact, fathers will get more time for arranging for their children's nuptial ceremony. Also, if both parents are sufficiently grown up, they will have strong and healthy children in lieu of the pale and sickly ones which are now-a-days born so often as the effect of early marriage in which wives become mothers even at thirteen. ... Another innovation wanted is that boys and girls should be more freely educated. ... The last remedy is that a man should not be allowed to take a second wife so long as the first is alive, unless a strong case is made out for this.

I should also suggest that the State should encourage such laudable schemes as are calculated to promote our social well-being. If high officers of the Government will by words or small deeds but be kindly disposed to promote and help such movements, we doubt not a new era will gradually be ushered into existence. The example of a few great men of society will tell and imitative progress will filter down to the masses.

—Girijabhusan Mitra, M.A., B.L.

Reflections on the Bhagavadgita

SWAMI ATULANANDA

Chapter 12 (*continued*)

12. Knowledge is indeed better than blind practice; meditation excels knowledge; surrender of the fruits of action is more esteemed than meditation; on surrender, Peace follows immediately.

Intellectual knowledge is better than practice without understanding. Meditation is better than intellectual knowledge. Higher than meditation is the abandonment of the fruit of actions, for it causes cessation from samsara, birth and death. So there is hope for all.

From the way in which the Lord has taught different paths for the bhakta in the previous shlokas, it would be possible to conclude that the first-mentioned path is the highest, and so in order till we come to renunciation of the results of actions as the lowest. This would be very discouraging to those who follow one of the paths mentioned after the highest. The Lord therefore extols the last-mentioned path, for those who follow that path may be considered the weakest by some, and they are therefore most in need of encouragement. But from this we must not conclude that the practice is insincere. In the first place it shows Sri Krishna's great love and tact. But furthermore, the praise is due because the renunciation of the fruits of action is a requisite factor in every religious path. To the lowest and the highest alike, peace comes only when there is non-attachment to results. He who practises constant meditation needs it as much as he who chooses this practice of renunciation of the fruits of action as the easiest and best-suited means to Bliss. Every devotee needs it. Therefore the Lord extols it so highly.

But now comes another question. What is high or low anyhow? If all these paths lead to

moksha, how then can we call any of them low? Our object of life is freedom. Who cares how the object is gained, how we get free, as long as we get there? So it is really not a question of high or low, but of suitability. Follow any of the paths best suited to you. That seems to be the teaching. One's own path, well followed, is better than others followed mistakenly. Sri Krishna does not give anyone an opportunity to feel proud because he follows this path or that: All ways lead to Me. Only move on. Be active; do not sit down in idleness, for then you will get nowhere. We must struggle for freedom; otherwise we will remain bound. Remember the parable of Sri Ramakrishna: When fish are caught in a net, some do not struggle at all but remain calm in the net, some again struggle hard to come out of the net, while a few are very happy to effect their escape by rending the net. So also there are three sorts of men, fettered (*baddha*), struggling (*mumukshu*), and released (*mukta*). We must be *mukti-kami*, longing for freedom. And that longing must find expression in sincere struggle. Each one must struggle according to his own means—the one as householder, the other as monk, the one through activity, the other through meditation. But all need to practise renunciation.

When Sri Ramakrishna was asked, 'What state of mind leads to salvation?' he answered: 'If by the grace of God the spirit of renunciation comes to one, then one can get rid of the attachment to lust and wealth, and then only is

one free from all worldly bondages.’ The key to open the room wherein God is works in a curiously contrary way. To reach God you have to renounce the world.

Sri Krishna has already explained the different paths of bhakti through worship of Ishvara, the Lord of the universe, and through work. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the worshippers of the absolute, the sannyasins, for whom there is no work, because they do not see any distinction between themselves and God. They are free from desire. This freedom from desire marks the highest spiritual condition. This portion illustrates the second part of Arjuna’s question, whether bhakti is higher or jnana. We will see what the conduct

of the sannyasins is like. Sri Krishna gives here a code of the highest morals and ethics, which when followed will make any man perfect. Though we cannot acquire every one of these qualities, some being fitted especially for the sannyasin-life, by the practice and mastering of any one of them, a wonderful change will result in life and character.

Let us see then who is the yogi who, renouncing all selfishness, worships the Absolute Deity, the one Spirit who abides in all. It is well worth knowing this, for such a devotee, the true sannyasin, is very dear to the Lord. We may hold him up as our ideal. Into his mould we want to be shaped. Sri Krishna says:

13. He who hates no creature and is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egotism, equal-minded in pleasure and pain, and forgiving,

14. Who is ever content and meditative, self-subjugated and possessed of firm conviction, with mind and intellect dedicated to Me—he who is thus devoted to Me is dear to Me.

Such a devotee cannot hate anyone, not even those who cause him pain and sorrow, because he regards all beings as himself. He is friendly to all and full of compassion for those who are in distress. He cannot do harm to any living being and so no creature need be in fear of him. Though he may possess things and though he may perform great deeds, the idea of ownership and of being the doer of great acts is not strong in him. He is never proud of his possessions or his deeds. Pain and pleasure do not make him lose his balance of mind. He remains unaffected even when abused. He does not allow any condition to throw his mind into a state of confusion or hatred or attachment. He is really the most efficient of men, because he is master of himself, he rules his own mind and body

with wisdom and discrimination. And so he is always content. He does not think of gaining anything beyond what the body needs to keep itself alive. He is a yogi, thoughtful, meditative. His conviction regarding the unreality of life and the reality of the Spirit is firmly established. His soul and heart, his hopes, his aspirations, his thoughts are all dedicated to Me. Such a devotee, says Sri Krishna, who thus loves Me and who thus offers his whole being to Me, whose whole life has thus become one continued act of worship unto Me—such a yogi is dear to Me. Such a one, we read in the Psalms (112.7), ‘shall not be afraid of evil tidings. His heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.’

And now Sri Krishna goes on to amplify what was said in 7.17: ‘I am very dear to the wise man and he is dear to Me.’

15. He with whom the world is never annoyed and who is not himself annoyed with the world, he who is free from elation, intolerance, fear and anxiety—he is dear to Me.

How often we are annoyed with the world, with people, with conditions. Things do not go as we want them to

go and we get annoyed, we become miserable. But not so the yogi. He does not allow his mind to be disturbed. His mind rests in God.

What does he care about annoyances, little troubles that pass by like the ship on the horizon? He dwells in Eternity. And so also he does not cause annoyance to others. Why should he? He has nothing to gain by it. He does not want anything. He is satisfied and contented. He lives in the Atman. There he finds his joy and rest. And all that he asks for is to remain fixed in That. Should he for a moment lose that consciousness of the Spirit, then he tries with all his might to regain it. But the world cannot give him that. So he does not go to the world for help. He makes no demand on society or on any person. He gives no cause for annoyance.

And when he has any wishes and these wishes are fulfilled, he does not become exalted or unduly agitated with joy; he is not carried away by his success, neither does failure make him despondent. He is always peaceful and contented.

Now we begin to understand why the

We think of jnanis as remote, cold and indifferent. But what is the fact? They flow over with love, sympathy and compassion, because they have realized the Truth. ... The true vision is oneness, one Soul appearing as many.

wise man is so very dear to the Lord. We think of jnanis as remote, cold and indifferent. But what is the fact? They flow over with love, sympathy and compassion, because they have realized the Truth. Hatred, selfishness and envy are all caused by ignorance, by seeing separation, by not being able to remove the spectacle of maya, which distorts our vision. The true vision is oneness, one Soul appearing as many. Difference occurs only on this level of consciousness. When we rise above it with the help of bhakti or jnana, then we see the delusion of it all. Then we realize that the One alone exists, and that we are only His reflections.

16. He who is free from wants, who is pure, efficient, unattached, untroubled and has given up all (selfish) undertakings—he who is thus devoted to Me is dear to Me.

He who is free from expectations, free of wants—how happy he is! Trusting in the Lord, he is not worried about the future. The yogi is clever, he possesses presence of mind and sound judgement. He is efficient, alert, alive, and not dull and stupid. He is prompt and quick in matters demanding

prompt action. He does not sway from his purpose. Nothing can trouble or disturb him. He abandons all selfish undertakings calculated to secure objects of desire in this world or even the next. He who thus serves the Lord is dear to Him.

(To be concluded)

Paths to the Divine

निर्विण्णानां ज्ञानयोगो न्यासिनामिह कर्मसु । तेष्वनिर्विण्णचित्तानां कर्मयोगस्तु कामिनाम् ॥
यदुच्छया मत्कथादौ जातश्रद्धस्तु यः पुमान् । न निर्विण्णो नातिसक्तो भक्तियोगोऽस्य सिद्धिदः ॥

Of these the path of knowledge is for those who have developed detachment from work and have renounced it; for those who have not this detachment but desire the fruits of work, there is the path of action; but for the man who has spontaneous faith in tales about Me and such other things, and who is neither averse nor overly attached to work, the path of devotion is rewarding.

—Uddhava Gita, 15.7-8

Hindu Woman as Life Partner

DR USHA KAPOOR

Hinduism regards man and woman as the two halves of the eternal Being, each constituting a vibrant, existential part, quite incomplete in itself. In the *Bṛihad-aranyaka Upanishad*, Prajāpati, the primordial God, divides himself into two—man and woman, the symbols of cosmic polarity deriving sustenance from the same source.¹ In the cosmic scheme man represents Purusha (the Person, Spirit) and woman Prakriti (Nature, primal Matter), both of whom unite to keep the world going. So goes the Vedic verse: 'I am He, you are She; I am song, you are verse; I am heaven, you are earth. We two shall here together dwell becoming parents of children.'²

The Matrimonial Ideal

Marriage is the coalescence of complementary opposites for pleasure, progeny and self-fulfilment. The cosmic model of the marriage of Sūryā, the daughter of the Sun, with the Aśvina twins (who defeated the prime suitor, Soma, in a racing contest) determines the praxis of the Hindu concept in this respect.³ Being equal halves of one essence, husband and wife are partners in joy and sorrow and in the fulfilment of the fourfold aims of life—dharma (ethical perfection), artha (material advancement), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation). Neither is superior to the other as each has different natural functions to perform and social obligations to fulfil. Hinduism expects the partners to shed their individual identities to become one at the physical, mental and psychical levels before transmuting the material relationship into a spiritual one. Says the Rig Veda in the context of 'Sūryā Vivāha': 'Bless now this bride, O bounteous Lord, cheering her heart with the gift of brave sons. Grant her ten sons; her husband

make the eleventh' (10.85.45).

Nowhere do the Vedas say that woman is man's property, as she came to be considered in certain periods of history. Nor is it enjoined that her role shall be subordinated to that of her husband. This is evident from the sukta of Sūryā's bridal in the Rig Veda: 'Enter your house as the household's mistress. May authority in speech ever be yours!' (10.85.26). 'Watch over this house as mistress of the home. Unite yourself wholly with your husband' (10.85.27). 'Here dwell ye, be not parted; enjoy full age, play and rejoice with sons and grandsons in your own house' (10.85.42). 'Act like a queen over your husband's father, over your husband's mother likewise, and his sister. Over all your husband's brothers be queen' (10.85.46).

In the Hindu rite of marriage, when the bridegroom holds the hand of the bride, he in a way promises his companionship on equal terms. When he asks her to tread on the stone, he wants her to be strong like it and not show weakness of any kind in any situation. 'Resist the enemies; overcome those who attack you.'⁴ Subsequent rites of marriage like the oblation of parched grain, circumambulation of fire and the taking of seven steps by the bride are equally dignifying for the girl. After the seventh step is taken the bridegroom tells her that they have come closer to each other. 'With seven steps we become friends. Let me reach your friendship. Let me not be severed from your friendship. Let not your friendship be severed from me.'⁵ Obviously 'friendship implies equality, not submission'. Before the departure of the bride from her parental home, the bridegroom touches her heart and reiterates the same feelings, adding that the Lord God has brought them together: 'I hold

your heart in serving fellowship. ... You are joined to me by the Lord of all creatures.'⁶ After reaching her husband's home, the bridegroom makes her look at the polar star after sunset and exhorts her to 'be firm with me', 'bear children' and stay together 'a hundred years' (1.8.19). All this shows that in an ideal Hindu marriage the girl is not a commodity but a respectable human being. Although monogamy is preferred and divorce discouraged, as the couple is believed to be united for ever in this and the next world, the *smṛtikāras* and others like Kauṭilya allow the dissolution of some forms of marriage such as the *brāhma*, *daiva*, *ārṣa* and *prājāpatya* with the consent of both parties in certain circumstances.

An Equal Half

The Hindu woman as life partner has a fourfold character: she is *ardhāṅginī*, one half of her husband, metaphorically speaking; *sahadharminī*, an associate in the fulfilment of human and divine goals; *sahakarmīnī*, a part to all her husband's actions; and *sahayoginī*, a veritable cooperator in all his ventures. Husband and wife together are called *dampati*, joint owners of the household, sharing work in terms of their biological, psychological and individual dharma. The former provides the seed (*bija*) and the latter the field (*kṣetra*) for its fructification, so that humans could be perpetuated in the cosmic process of evolution. Both have the joint responsibility of helping their children grow in all respects, but the contribution of the wife is always immense.

As life partner the Hindu woman has equal right to participate in religious rites and ceremonies; in fact, certain sacrifices like the Sitā harvest sacrifice, the Rudrayāga for suitable sons-in-law or the Rudrabali sacrifice for material prosperity are performed by women alone. Hindu lawgivers like Gobhila and Aśvalāyana ordain that no ritual or sacrifice can be complete (*sampūrṇa*) without the presence of the wife. Even Rama had to order for Sita's statue in gold to make up for her absence

during his Aśvamedha sacrifice. In the Ramayana, Rama's mother Kausalya offers oblations to the fire god Agni and Tara performs the Svastyayana ritual for the success of her husband Vali against Sugriva. Women of those days were quite learned in the Vedic lore. Draupadi was a *brahmavādinī* and Tara an adept at reciting mystic syllables. Oghavati, Arundhati and Sulabha possessed a thorough knowledge of the Vedas and imparted religious knowledge even to rishis. The spiritual attainments of Savitri and Anusuya have become legendary. In the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* one meets women of wisdom such as Maitreyi and Gargi. The former abandoned wealth for wisdom and the latter entered into a debate with the sage Yajnavalkya at the court of King Janaka. Much later, Bhārati, the wife of Maṇḍana Mīśra, carried forward the tradition by acting as judge in the philosophic debate between her husband and Shankaracharya. When she found her husband losing the debate, she emphatically told Shankaracharya that his victory would be complete only if he could defeat her, since she constituted her husband's better half.

The Vedas give a married woman the right to talk and debate independently. The wife is the home (*jāyēdastam*), says the Rig Veda.⁷ Besides, she is the treasure house of happiness,⁸ a point elaborated by Manu in a much more explicit way: 'Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law who desire (their own) welfare.'⁹ 'Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rites yield rewards' (3.56). 'Offspring, (due performance of) religious rites, faithful service, the highest conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and oneself depend on one's wife alone' (9.28).

Manu declares that the perfect man is one who constitutes a trinity made up of his wife, himself and their offspring (9.45). The wife being a gift from the gods (9.95), she ought to be

supported to the end of her life. If Manu points out the seductive nature of women (2.213-4), he is equally unsure of the unbridled passion of men. He advises that wise men must not be in the company of even their own mothers, sisters or daughters in a lonely place, for they may deviate from the right path (2.215)! Manu regards woman as a precious unit of the family and of society but denies them absolute freedom due to their physical vulnerability. He, however, distinguishes between the noble and virtuous and the degenerate women, and, like other *smṛtikāras*, criticizes those who are faithless, fickle, sensuous, immodest, quarrelsome and loose. 'Day and night women must be kept in dependence upon males and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments they must be kept under one's control' (9.2). Manu prescribes capital punishment for killers of women, exempts pregnant and old women from paying fines and suggests that as a matter of courtesy, they should be given precedence when crossing the road.

Such is the protection given to the Hindu wife in the Dharmashastras that she cannot be abandoned by her husband even if she indulges in sexual congress outside marriage or is raped. Both Devala and Yajñavalkya opine that a raped woman cannot be divorced as she becomes pure after menstruation. The latter adds that the wife can be abandoned if she conceives a baby from another person, kills a brahmin or insinuates against her husband; if she is a habitual drinker, suffers from prolonged illness, is cunning, treacherous, sterile, exceptionally extravagant, or uncouth. But even in these cases she should be fed and clad well and properly looked after.¹⁰ An abandoned woman without an issue or a male protector becomes a social responsibility, says Manu.¹¹ If anyone grabs her property during her lifetime, that person deserves to be punished like a thief (8.29, 352).

When Kalidasa wrote that women go the way of their husbands as moonlight follows the moon or lightning the cloud,¹² he meant

thereby that they were not different from each other. The Hindu scriptures lay emphasis on harmony between husband and wife that is so essential for family peace and prosperity. Harmony requires understanding, which can only be among equals. In the Rīg Veda, the couple jointly pray: 'May all Devas and Āpas unite our hearts. May Mātariśvā, Dhātā, Deṣṭrī all bind us close.'¹³ The highest duty of man and wife, says Manu, is to be faithful to each other. While the supreme duty of the husband is to safeguard his wife, to care for her needs and necessities, and to keep her happy with gifts and presents, the wife is expected to be pious and chaste, sincere and faithful to her partner, gentle, suave, skilled and sweet-tongued.

The *Pāṭivratya* Ideal

The observance of the *pāṭivratya dharma* by a woman is not tantamount to servility and subordination. Marital fidelity is greatly valued in the Hindu tradition as it leads to family harmony and bestows occult powers. A woman who sees the Lord in her husband and makes him her very life cannot deviate from the path of virtue; and virtue is power itself. There are many examples of Hindu women who as life partners made great sacrifices, underwent trials and tribulations, and some times showed their thaumaturgic powers born of chastity (*satitva*). Gandhārī covered her eyes with a strip of cloth as her husband Dhṛitarāshtra, the king of Hastinapura, was blind. Mādri, one of Pāṇḍu's wives, burnt herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, a practice which remained current in some Indian communities and regions down to the British period, when it was banned in 1829. Sītā accompanied Rāma to the forest during the days of his exile, kept her chastity intact while in the custody of Rāvaṇa, the king of Lāṇka, and went through the *agni parikṣā* so that her husband could fulfil his *rāja dharma*. Savitrī confronted Yama, the god of death, and saved the life of her husband. Sati Anusūyā turned the Hindu trinity of gods into children. Litter-

ateurs like Kalidasa and Tulsidas became men of learning because of their wives. During the Muslim invasions, many women committed *jauhar* (the custom of entering a bonfire when the defeat of their menfolk was certain) in order to preserve their chastity. The resistance put up by Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi (widow of Gangadhar Rao) and the Rani of Ramgarh (widow of Raja Lachman Singh) against the British during the rising of 1857 has few parallels in history. Countless Hindu women participated along with their husbands in India's struggle for independence.

Although the concept of *pati-paramēśvara* (regarding one's husband as God) has suffered an erosion in the wake of women's empowerment, respect for the husband continues, as is evident from the observance by Hindu women of such traditional vows as *Vaṭa Sāvitri*, *Haritālīkā* and *Karka Caturthi*—all aimed at a long and happy conjugal life.

Nowhere do the accredited Hindu scriptures ordain that women should be abused, disgraced, chastised without reason or divorced in ordinary circumstances. Yet expectations from women as life partners have been many and varied. The best female partner, according to a popular Sanskrit adage, is one who renders advice like a minister, obeys like a maidservant, feeds like a mother, pleases like the nymph *Rambhā*, acts as a veritable

companion, and has the forbearance of Mother Earth.

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Partners in Faith

The sage[-woman] placed her hand on the head of Sita and said: 'It is a great blessing to possess a beautiful body; you have that. It is a greater blessing to have a noble husband; you have that. It is the greatest blessing to be perfectly obedient to such a husband; you are that. You must be happy.'

Sita replied, 'Mother, I am glad that God has given me a beautiful body and that I have so devoted a husband. But as to the third blessing, I do not know whether I obey him or he obeys me. One thing alone I remember, that when he took me by the hand before the sacrificial fire—whether it was a reflection of the fire or whether God himself made it appear to me—I found that I was his and he was mine. And since then, I have found that I am the complement of his life, and he of mine.'

—Swami Vivekananda, *'The Women of India'*

Sri Sarada Devi: The Power of Love and Compassion

DR SREEMATI MUKHERJEE

How can a nineteenth-century Bengali village housewife speak to the needs of a modern Indian woman, situated in the twenty-first century at the crossroads of culture, history, tradition and modernity?¹ In a world that knows, perhaps, one of the worst crises in human values, what has Sri Ramakrishna's wife, Sri Sarada Devi, to offer us? As I look around me, I notice a world where moral and psychological fragmentation, relativism of values, and the increasing complexities of urban existence make simple certitudes impossible. One could be accused of intellectual bad faith if one professes one's belief or reverence for traditionally sanctioned spiritual figures or icons. The only kind of belief that is intellectually sanctioned is perhaps belief in social progress through Marxist revolution or belief in the methodologies of science, although such positions are not free from their own inner contradictions and moments of bad faith. Therefore, living at a time when trenchant skepticism and non-commitment to absolute positions is intellectually de rigueur, I would like to explore what the values of humility, silence and self-abnegation embodied in the character of Sri Sarada Devi can mean for someone who wishes to avoid the terrifying abysses that intellectual power or intellectual culture alone *can* lead to.

Loneliness and alienation are not really the characteristic malaise of twentieth-century life alone. In mid nineteenth-century England, Matthew Arnold (1822-88) had pointed out the gradual alienation of the intellectual particularly, from both the self and nature. In *The Scholar Gipsy* he lays the burden of blame not only on the increasing materialism and mech-

anization of society but also on an excessive life of the intellect, which makes mental poise and serenity difficult to achieve. Those acquainted with the Victorian ethos will know that not only was it a period of frenetic intellectual and scientific pursuit, but also one in which the manifold complexities of urban culture often caused the self-conscious individual to retreat from meaningful relationships and a meaningful response to nature. In the poem *To Marguerite* Arnold poignantly utters:

Yes! In the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless water wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*.²

The trend towards the increasing incarceration of the individual within the often futile and oppressive life of the self continued in Western culture (reflecting tendencies in our own culture today), and emerged as an image of universal or global disorder and sterility in what is perhaps *the* seminal poem of the twentieth century—TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In this ground-breaking poem Eliot visualized/dramatized this state of spiritual nullity and sterility as a place or a state where there is

... no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road.³

His answer to this state of spiritual malaise that afflicts the world are the three words of advice that Brahma (Prajapati) supposedly gave respectively to the gods, to man and to the demons in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: *dāmyata*, *datta* and *dayadhvam*.⁴ Eliot, of course, changes the order of the words in his poem to *datta*, *dayadhvam* and *dāmyata*, which, Harish Trivedi in *Postcolonial Transactions* has taken

great pains to point out, is an act of great intellectual casuistry on Eliot's part. I am not interested in debating these questions here, but would like to draw attention to the closing lines of the poem, which borrow the traditional invocation of peace at the end of most of the Upanishads: 'Shantih! Shantih! Shantih!' It is with the word *shanti* or *shantih* that I would like to start exploring the relevance of Sri Sarada Devi's life for us, and for myself, situated at the crossroads of tradition and modernity in India.

Is Shanti Still Possible?

How does one explain the meaning of the word *shanti*, I wonder. Is it something that one arrives at through meditation alone, or through reconciling sometimes the most brutal contraries of experience, or through connecting with some of the most vital and abiding areas of one's own being? Eliot's own explanation of it in the elaborate notes he provides at the end of the poem is: 'The Peace which passeth understanding.'⁵ Jibananda Das in his famous poem *Banalata Sen*, a poem that echoes and re-echoes with the loneliness and fatigue of living in the world, uses the word *shanti* to describe the invaluable gift that Banalata Sen eventually gave the poet.⁶ From the echoes and re-echoes that the frequent use of long vowel sounds in Bengali creates in the poem, the word *shanti* reverberates through the multiple layers of experience that the 'thousand' years of the poet's 'walking' on the face of the earth embodies.⁷ In the end the word retains an incalculable dimension whose meaning cannot be satisfactorily fixed. It suggests a mysterious regeneration which is not simply romantic regeneration. In song 410 of the *Gitabitan* Rabindranath Tagore uses the term to imply a regeneration that lights up the darkness of experience. It is to all these realms of experience, part understood, part visualized, part articulated, but experienced deeply as 'the still point of the turning world',⁸ that I would refer my understanding of Sri Sarada

Devi.

Shanti as Powerlessness

Sri Sarada Devi had none of the external conditions of power as we understand it today, none of the accomplishments that make us viable and competitive commodities in the ruthless rat race of our professional lives. However, her life perhaps bears out the truth of the following lines from the Gospel of Matthew: 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.'⁹ In my opinion she stands for that inexplicable condition of grace which operates on us in mysterious and unseen ways, carrying restorative and healing powers. A kind of grace that Shakespeare visualized in Cordelia, who importuned the earth to yield forth its 'blest secrets' and its 'unpublished virtues' in order to cure the tempestuous sorrow and raging illness of her father's mind.¹⁰

I think when we look at Holy Mother's (this term was first used by her Western devotees) life (1853-1920) we have to situate it within its particular social, economic and cultural context. Born in a village of Bengal with few opportunities for a formal education, she was married off at the age of five. The lives of extraordinary people do not normally fit the trajectory of everyday lives, nor can they be codified according to conventional patterns and moulds. While obeying certain conventional patterns of a woman's existence in late nineteenth-century Bengal, her life defies and goes beyond such conventions, and even contains paradoxical elements. Married, yet not married, housewife and sannyasini at the same time, she remains, like Sri Ramakrishna, the ultimate enigma, whose meaning it might worth be our pains to try and comprehend somewhat.

In his essay 'My Week with Gandhi' the American journalist Louis Fischer made insightful observations about the nature of Gandhi's power.¹¹ Citing examples of presidents

and prime ministers like Lloyd George and Churchill who functioned within the external accoutrements of power, Fischer exclaims about Gandhi, 'His power was nil, his authority enormous. It came of love. The source of his power lay in his love.'¹² I feel that such a comment would be extremely appropriate in the context of Holy Mother's life, whose power lay in her seeming powerlessness.

Patience as the Defining Mode of Power/Powerlessness

Indeed, the kind of power she embodied seemed to work best not through anger and admonition—although she had provocation enough—but through patience and endurance that went even beyond the mythical and partook of the condition of grace that I alluded to before. Even if we read her as an avatara (as her devotees surely do), we must keep in mind that she had her inescapable human dimensions, and for a human being to have the kind of patience and tolerance she exemplified, borders on standards that remain unreachable for most of us. If she stands for Shakti, then it is a Shakti that expresses itself in its limitless capacity for tolerance and forgiveness, and its capacity to bear pain. Like Jesus Christ, whose trials on the Cross became one of the ultimate symbols of endurance under pain that the human imagination can encompass, Sarada Devi provides a fairly recent historical example of the possibilities of such endurance in a human being.

Sacrifice as a Viable Existential Mode

Sri Sarada Devi's life was problematic, to say the least. Married to a man who wished to pursue sannyasa and God realization, she managed to make the sacrifice of domestic bliss very early in life. If she had bliss in the company of Sri Ramakrishna, it was not the regular kind of wedded bliss that many women still want. Her life was marked by sacrifice at every point. If there was pleasure, then it centred around watching kirtan and danc-

ing in Sri Ramakrishna's room through a bamboo curtain; in conversing with women devotees; in training Latu Maharaj, who came to Sri Ramakrishna as a boy, in domestic and kitchen chores; in casual and simple conversation with her husband; and later on in life, having the assurance of the love of a great many devotees, householder and monastic. Seen from the standpoint of a woman's sensibility, her greatest sacrifice was probably giving up the desire to have a child. Historically and culturally located at a time when motherhood remained a woman's foremost area of self-expression, she had to renounce what seems a powerful and instinctive desire for the sake of the ideal of dispassion and detachment that her husband wished to follow. A certain incident narrated in Swami Gambhirananda's Bengali biography on her will attest to the fact that such a decision or choice was not without feelings of regret for her.

Once while on a visit to Kamarpukur during the early years of her married life, she heard Sri Ramakrishna holding forth in a semi-humorous, semi-serious mood on how injudicious it was to have children, since the children whose *annaprashana* (first rice-feeding) parents celebrated, almost inevitably died. His constant harping on the death of the children occasioned a rare moment of remonstrance from Mother. She quietly exclaimed from within, 'Would all of them have died?' Whereupon Sri Ramakrishna delightedly exclaimed that he had indeed stepped on the tail of a true-bred snake.¹³ The incident with its mixture of humour and pathos, testifies to her desire to have a child. To quote facts well known to devotees of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna had assured her that her need for children would one day be met, and she would have so many that she would not have time for herself. Indeed, this came true, and if the idea of Shakti symbolizes plenitude, Mother was loved, demanded upon, and also harassed by devotees male and female for all the years of her life after the pass-

ing away of Sri Ramakrishna.

Shakti: Destruction, Defying Categorization, Ultimately Enigmatic

In the biography by Brahmachari Akshayachaitanya, the first book-length study of her life, there is a passage where the author quotes Swami Vivekananda as saying that within Holy Mother's apparently calm exterior was embodied the power of the destructive aspect (of God as woman and Shakti).¹⁴ If she embodies Shakti, as Sri Ramakrishna himself said she did,¹⁵ then we have to keep in mind that energy must also have its terrifying dimensions. My mind goes back to an incident I read many years ago, once again in Swami Gambhirananda's biography. In the chapter entitled 'Devi' he refers to an incident where, in response to someone tentatively suggesting that a mad relative of hers might set fire to an ashrama created for Sri Ramakrishna, Mother seemed to undergo a facial transformation and declared in a loud and unnatural tone, 'That would be just wonderful! Just the way He wanted it! Let everything be a vast cremation ground.' Thereupon she started laughing, once again in a loud and unnatural manner, which readers familiar with Bengali will recognize in the term *attahasya* (373).

Credit should be given to Swami Gambhirananda for including this piece of information that offers what many would construe as an unnatural, uncanny and even monstrous dimension of Mother's personality. However, the incident seems to underscore the complexity of the idea of Shakti. Sri Ramakrishna speaks of Kali or Mahamaya as someone who gives birth to a child and then gobbles it up. If Kali means Time that both redeems and destroys, accepting Kali means accepting tragedy as integral to life. Kali is no symbol that speaks to one of various kinds of power only, but also an idea that stands for the struggles embedded in life. By that token, even if we are afforded a rare glimpse into the terrifying

depths of Sri Sarada Devi's personality in an incident like this, she also exemplifies suffering and pain as *that* face of Kali who is Time.

Shakti: Fortitude

If one were to peruse her biographies written by Brahmachari Akshayachaitanya, Swami Gambhirananda and Swami Tapasyananda, one would become aware of Sarada Devi's grinding domestic routine. As Swami Tathagatananda, head of the Vedanta Society of New York, once said at a congregation in which I happened to be present, 'None of you, I can guarantee, would have been able to take her routine in that narrow, extremely low-roofed room, hung over with pots and pans, crowded with women relatives and women visitors, in the way she did, from three in the morning till about eleven in the night.' The lives of women vegetable sellers who travel long distances to sell their produce, or hospital ayahs who work many hours outside their house without profitable gains recompensing them, perhaps bear a much closer relationship to the sheer physical demands of her work routine, than us who often occupy elite positions in society and remain far removed from the conditions of such labour.

It will be worthwhile to remember that Sri Sarada Devi lived a life that by most standards could be called qualified and circumscribed by poverty. Indeed, there is enough documentation to prove that after the death of Sri Ramakrishna, when she lived mostly alone in his parental home at Kamarpukur from 1887 to 1890, she wore saris that were knotted in various places to cover up the rents in the fabric, and that she also lived on a diet that consisted of rice and spinach, without even salt to season the fare. Although her stay at Kamarpukur was punctuated by trips to Calcutta and to places of pilgrimage, it was an intensely difficult period of her life. Besides the fact of poverty, she also had to face the indifference of Sri Ramakrishna's surviving relatives and the cruelty of villagers, many of

whom criticized her for not subscribing to the strict norms dictating a widow's appearance. Keeping in mind Sri Ramakrishna's wish that she wear ornaments and a sari that attested to her married state, she did not bow to the weight of public opinion, but preserved her dignity and singularity of purpose in the face of public criticism.

In the Midst of Family Life

Unhappy with her daughter's state in Kamarpukur, Shyamasundari Devi, her mother, requested Sri Sarada Devi to take up residence with her in Jayrambati, where she lived on and off till her death. Holy Mother had four surviving brothers, Prasannakumar, Kalikumar, Baradaprasad and Abhaycharan, and their families now became her own. Her youngest and most promising brother Abhaycharan passed away shortly, leaving behind a wife (Surabala) and an infant daughter (Radharani or Radhu). Surabala had lost her mother as a child and had been brought up by her aunt and grandmother, who too passed away shortly after her husband's death. Whatever the reasons for her mental unhinging, she thereupon became completely incapable of looking after her daughter. Observing her callous treatment of Radhu in the family courtyard, Mother resolved to take responsibility for the child herself. From that day onwards, practically till the last days of her life, Holy Mother remained Radhu's formal caretaker.

Some aspects of Sri Sarada Devi's life have a persistent quality. They are her unwavering commitment to people both within and without the family, a scrupulous sense of dispensing her duties and an untiring espousal of the doctrine of work. In her youth it was Sri Ramakrishna, his mother, women devotees like Golap Ma, would-be monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and other householder devotees who visited him who benefited from her ceaseless attention to their welfare. Her own needs of washing, eating and sleeping were met with the minimum of fuss and almost be-

yond the direct observation of any person. In our age of obstreperous flaunting of ourselves and our rejection of the values of quietness and patience, maybe we need to look at the quiet message that her life sends us. Apart from an occasional moment of grumbling (85), she submitted to an arduous routine of work with the utmost grace and acceptance. Her life is well documented, and if this was not the reality of her nature, there would be stray references here and there, arguing to the contrary. She retained a habit of contentment well into her final years, and rarely displayed displeasure or taciturnity.

Her domestic life with her brothers' families was vexing, to say the least. In the early years of her stay with her brothers, Kaliprasanna particularly harangued her constantly for money. Later on Radhu, Surabala and Nalini (Prasannakumar's daughter) each took a part in taxing and stretching her patience to its utmost limits. The three women mentioned above were a constant feature of her retinue, whether she lived in Jayrambati or in Calcutta. Of course, the presence of women devotees like Golap Ma and Yogin Ma lessened the burden of living with such oppressive and intractable relatives, but Sri Sarada Devi mostly lived out a domestic existence that was troublesome and precarious, to say the least. The principal share in making her family life truly thorn-infested was of course Radhu's and Surabala's.

Love as *the* Defining Mode of Being

Radhu was often sick and had to be nursed very carefully, and Sri Sarada Devi often took the burden of this nursing. As a child she (Radhu) had a sweet temperament, but as she developed and matured into adult years, she lost a great deal of her earlier sweetness and in fact acquired a complaining, truculent nature. Holy Mother, unremitting in her care and attention towards Radhu, often bore the brunt of Radhu's temperamental behaviour that sometimes crossed all recognizable limits

of decency and order. I shall refer to certain incidents that occurred towards the end of Holy Mother's life.

By this time Radhu was not only married but also the mother of a child. During the months of her pregnancy, Radhu's nerves had been in such a state of stress that she could not adjust to even the most peaceful and unproblematic of surroundings; the least noise anywhere would be enough to upset her. Having moved around with her to various places, Holy Mother eventually resided with her in a small house in a place called Koalpara, where the almost absolute quietness of the village surroundings satisfied Radhu. For someone who was used to so much attention from a variety of devotees both male and female, Holy Mother could well have been a little less accommodating of Radhu's idiosyncrasies. But such was the absolute nature of her commitment to this girl that she never walked away from what she read as her duty in a particular situation.

In spite of being the recipient of such loving care for years on end, Radhu remained capable of the most negative reciprocation imaginable. Once denied opium, which she had formed a habit of taking from the time of the difficult delivery of her child, Radhu took a large brinjal from a basket of vegetables that Holy Mother was cutting, and hurled it against her back. Sri Sarada Devi's back swelled up at the point of contact, but all she said was, 'Thakur, don't count that as Radhu's sin. She's witless!' (268).

Within the bounds of my knowledge, I can only think of Christ's reaction on the Cross, where he prayed to his Father to 'forgive' the perpetrators who had executed the deed of nailing him on the Cross, as an analogous incident. Absolute forgiveness of this nature is hard to imagine, but Sri Sarada Devi remains a fairly recent historical example of this kind of ultimate human possibility. Perhaps, this is the 'water' that Eliot was bemoaning the lack of in the rock-strewn wasteland of our

modern existence.

Radharani, as I have mentioned before, was not the only thorn disturbing the domestic peace of Holy Mother's household. Surabala would often break out into insane demonstrations of anger and jealousy, not stopping to accuse Sri Sarada Devi of appropriating Radhu for her own self. Once Holy Mother lost her patience and declared in an agitated tone, a rough translation of which amounts to 'Look, don't treat me as an ordinary person! You are lucky I don't take offence with what you say. ... Your daughter will remain yours. I can cut off her hold on me any minute that I choose to!' (291). Nalini for her part insisted on airing all her petty superstitions and obsessions. Once she told Sri Sarada Devi that she would have to take her bath all over again because a crow had committed some imaginary offence on her. Whereupon Sri Sarada Devi rejoined, 'Obsessions! Your mind is never clean of them. They will increase as much as you allow them to' (409). To this same Nalini, she had on a similar occasion insisted on the purity of the mind, because it was the mind, she felt, that determined the perception of good and evil (*ibid.*).

Despite the frustrating conditions of her domestic life, Sri Sarada Devi had acquired an iconic status by the time she died. Sought after, importuned and loved by devotees not only from Bengal but from all over India, she retained till the last days of her life a principle of care and commitment to all those who sought her shelter in some way. Perhaps more than Sri Ramakrishna, she was tolerant of human excesses and deviances. Given her social, cultural and historical location as a Bengali woman with a conservative rural upbringing, it was no ordinary act of catholicity to say that the thief Amjad and her much beloved Sharat (Swami Saradananda) were equally her sons (328). This was in response to Nalini's remonstrance one day at Jayrambati, that she should not extend excessive hospitality to Amjad knowing that he was a thief. She also extended

hospitality to Nivedita and to the Americans Sarah Bull and Josephine MacLeod at a time when foreigners were considered to be 'un-touchable' by conservative Bengalis.

Her last words to a woman devotee were: 'If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own!' (450). It is on this note that I would like to end my tribute to Sri Sarada Devi. She touched the lives of many while she was alive. Even after her death she continues to draw many lives to her and perhaps provides them with that still point of rest or repose, *that shanti* with which this article began. ~

Notes and References

1. What, in short, is modernity? Different people, different critics and different cultural historians define it variously. In India, perhaps it would be safe to equate the arrival of modernity with the revival or inculcation of scientific and rational methods of enquiry that was one of the gifts (although the word *gift* is used keeping in mind the coercive, politically implicated and sometimes emasculating effects of Western education in India) that Western thinkers brought to the country. We see the visible manifestation of this spirit in Raja Rammohun Roy and his championing of a more rational and thereby a more humane basis to social practices and rituals which were sometimes stifling, life-denying and cruelly oppressive to women in particular.
2. Matthew Arnold, 'To Marguerite' in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse (1250-1950)*, ed. Helen Gardner (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 687.
3. T S Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays (1909-1950)* (New York, San Diego and London: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1950), 47.
4. *The Upanishads*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1975), 182-3.
5. *Complete Poems and Plays*, 55.
6. Jibanananda Das, 'Banalata Sen' in *Bangla Kabita Samuchchay*, ed. Sukumar Sen (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1991), 412.
7. 'Thousand' and 'walking' are simply English translations of the Bengali words *hajaar* and *chalitechhi* that occur in the poem.
8. 'Burnt Norton' in *Complete Poems and Plays*, 119.
9. St Matthew, 16.25.
10. *King Lear*, 4.4.
11. Louis Fischer, 'My Week with Gandhi' in *Higher Secondary English Selections (Prose)* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department on behalf of the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education, 1984).
12. *Ibid.*, 61.
13. Swami Gambhirananda, *Sri Ma Sarada Devi* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1987), 32. Translations of all Bengali citations are mine.
14. Brahmachari Akshayachaitanya, *Sri Sri Sarada Devi* (Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 1396 BE), 108.
15. *Sri Ma Sarada Devi*, 105.

She Merely Lived!

By her outward manner she (Sri Sarada Devi) was the most obscure of all the household, yet beneath the veil of simplicity which enveloped her there was a lofty majesty of bearing which caught the heart and bowed it in prayerful homage at her feet. The human covering was too thin to hide the radiance of divine consciousness beneath. She never taught, seldom ever counselled. She merely lived. And who can tell how many lives were cleansed and exalted by that holy living?

—Sister Devamata

Devotion as Counter-marginality

Some Indian Women Models

K S SUNITA

Indian tradition has generally respected womanhood. Even God is regarded as half man, half woman, *ardhanarishwara*. Manu declares that where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; where they are not honoured, all work becomes fruitless. Women too are human beings and have as much right to full development as men have with regard to opportunities for intellectual and spiritual growth. In early times, education for women was encouraged. The presiding deity of learning also is a goddess, Saraswati.

During the Vedic age men and women enjoyed equal opportunities for education and work. Women were eligible for *upanayana*, or initiation, and *brahmacharya*, or the study of the knowledge of Brahman. In later periods of our history, education of women was sadly neglected and women lapsed into illiteracy and superstition.

This article, which focuses on the image of women in devotional literature, is an attempt at surveying the position of women in Indian society during the last five thousand years, and to present a kaleidoscopic picture of their dreams and visions, hopes and aspirations, through an illustrative study of the lives and achievements of the more outstanding among them.

The Concept of Marginality

The position of women in any society is a true index of its cultural and spiritual attainments. And the concept of devotion is one yardstick through which this can be measured. The twentieth century saw much effort to survey the position, rights and role of women. The present century too is giving

thought and continued articulation to the concerns of women living in a predominantly patriarchal set-up. In the course of this preoccupation concepts such as *marginality* and gender politics have assumed wide currency. Over the past two decades the term *marginality* has received much critical attention from feminist scholars in various disciplines. A common meaning defines the term as something that is on the margin or close to the limit, below or beyond which something ceases to be possible or desirable. It is essentially in this latter definition that the term *marginality* has been rendered useful for current feminist criticism.

The basic idea behind an attitude such as marginality is the exclusion or preclusion of women from active participation in social and cultural activities. For instance, the progressive deterioration of the status of women in India in the post-Vedic period gradually resulted in their being denied even the most basic education; they were expressly forbidden even from reading the scriptures.

The trend of marginality could not, of course, prevent some exceptional women from making a place for themselves in spite of the male-dominated structure in which they were born. One of the most significant counters to this practice of marginality was through devotion—devotion and commitment as is amply illustrated in devotional literature. Women of exceptional devotional temperament down the ages have come to occupy centre stage in patriarchal society and have consolidated their precarious marginal status immensely by the exercise of devotion. For instance, numerous models of Indian

women who have moved to the 'centre' by abandoning their marginal space have left a significant stamp of their personality on the culture of our country. I would like to mention a few of these.

Two Epic Figures

First in the list is Savitri. Born a princess, Savitri, the beloved daughter of the Madra king Ashwapati, was brought up amid luxuries and given a liberal education. She was asked to choose a husband worthy of her, and she went on a long excursion to the woods and visited the hermitages of the royal sages. A young man named Satyavat captured her soul. The king bowed to the will of his daughter and all arrangements were made for the marriage. Sage Narada was overwhelmed to witness such devotion, chastity and strength of will in one born on earth, and gave Savitri his blessings, though he knew that she would lose her husband within a short period. After the marriage Savitri put away all her costly things and lived like a daughter-in-law of a hermit. She was totally devoted to her family and attended to the needs of her old mother-in-law and served her blind father-in-law. Amid her busy daily routine she pondered on the ominous words of Narada that she would be a young widow.

Then the fateful day of Satyavat's death dawned. She accompanied her husband to the woods. Yama drew out the soul from Satyavat's body and proceeded towards the south. Savitri followed Yama. He was surprised to see her and to hear her relentless words of wisdom and love for her husband. Yama offered numerous boons to Savitri in order to stop her from following him. The last boon she requested of Yama was: 'Grant that I may have, through Satyavat, one hundred sons, strong and wise, who would perpetuate our race.'

Yama, having already granted a series of boons, agreed to the last one too without giving a thought to it and asked her to depart. But Savitri humbly said: 'Unless my husband

Satyavat comes back to life, your promise cannot be fulfilled.' The divine dispenser of justice, delighted to be defeated by one who was so pure, so loyal and so fearless, said: 'O worthy lady! Here is your husband, freed by me.' In this way, Savitri could free her husband's soul from the lord of death, thus becoming an embodiment of the ideal of devotion. She had abiding faith in the dharma of the universe. It is through her unflinching devotion that she moved to the centre of this story from the marginal space that would have been her allotted place as a woman. And her contribution to the culture of our country is marked by her help in the establishment of a structure for Indian women to emulate.

Draupadi is another great woman of India, an important character from the Mahabharata and embodiment of courage and fortitude. In a sense, she is the central figure of the great epic and her character has been depicted with wonderful skill. The very circumstances of her birth made it abundantly clear that she had come to this world to fulfil a great destiny.

As a wife, she became the ideal mistress of the household. She was a woman possessing courage and a sense of dignity. One of the most striking events in the Mahabharata is Draupadi's plea to Lord Krishna for an unending stretch of material to cover her shame in the presence of all the members of the assembly. It is indeed a remarkable incident in devotional literature. The loftiness of her soul, her unflinching courage in the face of disasters, her spirit of self-sacrifice, and above all, her moral earnestness and spiritual integrity have shed a lustre on the ancient Indian ideal of womanhood.

Some Medieval Hindu Saints

Another model from among the great women of India, who abandoned her marginal status and moved to the centre, is a young girl of eighteen, Muktabai, the illustrious and devoted sister of Jnandev, the sage of Maharashtra. The story of her life is bound up

no doubt with that of Jnandev; no separate life of hers is known. But in times of conflict she was the one who guided her saintly brother. Muktabai was all along with her brothers and received her share of admiration and honour. She was also possessed of supernatural powers like her brothers. She turned into a saint and initiated others into spirituality through her deep devotion.

A legend highlights her centrality. It is said that on Jnandev's request she became a spiritual guide to Changdev. Another story goes like this: Once Jnandev was annoyed with some people and locked himself up. Muktabai had an aptitude for composing verses. When she came to know of this she composed *abhangs* (verses) to remind Jnandev that a saint is pure in mind and forgives the offences of people. In this way she enlightened her brother. Hers was a very striking personality possessed of the many qualities that also made her brothers great. It was very unfortunate that her life on earth was extremely brief.

Some North Indian women made important contributions towards the enrichment of thought and literature. One of them was Lalla (Lal Ded), the poetess of Kashmir who lived approximately in the fourteenth century. She has been rightly described as 'a predecessor of the medieval reformers of India such as Ramanand and Kabir'. Lalla adopted a famous Kashmiri Shaiva saint as her spiritual guide and herself became an ardent devotee of Shaivism. She was also a yogini, a mendicant ascetic who wandered about preaching yogic doctrines as the best means for ultimate absorption into the Supreme. She taught that human beings should have absolute dependence on the will of the Almighty. She zealously advocated the wisdom of being 'all things to all men'. She insisted on the performance of duty for duty's sake. She said:

Whatsoever thing I do of toil
Burdens of completion on me lie;
Yet unto another falls the spoil
And gains he the fruit thereof, not I.

Lalla's verses in fact form an exceptional stream of Indian devotional literature, inspired by lofty religious thoughts, and in this respect she ranks with some other women thinkers and poetesses of medieval India, as for instance Mirabai.

Mirabai was one of the foremost exponents of the bhakti cult and an inspired poetess. She sang in praise of Krishna in Brajbhasha. Krishna was her lord and the sovereign Deity for whom she developed the most intense love and devotion. She mixed freely with holy men, not deterred in the least by unmerited public criticism. She had to face the consequences of her unorthodox behaviour.

Mira indeed occupies a sacred place in the history of Indian thought and culture for her deep and passionate religious devotion as also for her poetry, in which her genius is revealed. Her odes and hymns are rich, sweet and inspiring because they are characterized by a tenderness and simplicity of feeling that are genuine outpourings of a heart completely dedicated to God.

The theistic movement that swept over South India produced a large number of women saints. Once the saint Vishnuchitta, going round his garden, found an infant of radiant beauty lying on a tulasi bed. He took her home and brought her up as his daughter. She was named Kodai and her neighbours called her Andal ('ruler'). She imbibed her father's devotional fervour and dedicated herself to Ranganatha (Vishnu). In her divine love for Him she underwent many hardships of vows and penances for thirty days, and the thirty songs that she sang during that time—the *Tiruppavai*—are among the most charming devotional lyrics of Tamil literature.

As art and devotional literature in South India attained fullness and freedom of expression, another unsung model from Karnataka, Honnamma, a shudra woman, became much reputed as an author of socio-political compositions in Kannada. She was a maidservant in the palace of the Mysore king Chikka Deva-

raja and a favourite of his queen Devajammanni. The queen arranged for Honnamma's education under a well-known scholar proficient in the Vedas and Vedanta. The teacher was so pleased with the ability of the pupil that he called her a 'goddess of charming literature'. This praise so impressed the king that he told his queen to get a literary piece written by Honnamma. Accordingly Honnamma wrote an important book called *Hadibadeya Dharma*, which deals with the duties of a chaste woman.

Muslim Women

Some women models from Islam also moved to the 'centre' through devotion. Razia Sultana, the daughter of the great Slave king Iltutmish, has the unique distinction of being the only woman to occupy the throne of Delhi. She was well versed in the reading of the Quran and had a fair knowledge of several other sciences and possessed all the qualities necessary for a ruler. She had accompanied her father on several campaigns, and carried on the administration of her vast kingdom with skill and wisdom.

Jahan Ara Begum, daughter of Emperor Shahjahan, was another great woman of India during the Mughal period. Her life was mostly spent in devoted service to her disconsolate father and ambitious brothers. Her father's love for her and her filial devotion to him is indeed a remarkable chapter in Mughal history.

Under the influence of Islam, women and their various activities in the manifold aspects of national life generally came to be assigned a place in the background. The old maxim, 'A woman's place is in her home', found repeated and emphatic support from Muslim saints and philosophers.

A Modern Exemplar

Some models from the eastern part of the country have also found a place among the great women of India. Sarojini Naidu is one of them. She was an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius, and an ideal politician. She was an excellent poet too. In her poetry we find an exquisite melody and a fine delicacy of feeling, devotion and expression blended with a freshness and exuberance of spirit. After completing her education in London, she returned to India and married Dr Govindarajulu Naidu breaking the barriers of caste. She gradually withdrew herself from writing poetry and actively participated in the Indian women's movement along with Mahatma Gandhiji for India's freedom. She was the first woman to become the governor of a province in India, namely Uttar Pradesh.

Conclusion

The story of women's selfless devotion to their families, of their noble deeds of self-sacrifice and contribution to spiritual welfare remains largely untold in our predominantly patriarchal orientation. In spite of such impediments, some models have left their indelible footprints on the sands of time.

Thus, among the many great women of India from different arenas of life and different periods of history, introduced so far in the foregoing paragraphs, some common elements may be noticed, namely, spiritual strength, purity, humility, devotion, self-control, moral courage, selfless love—qualities that go to adorn spiritual life. Through these essentially feminine traits, which find their complete manifestation in some significant models, we can conclude that through devotion the oppression of 'marginality' has been counteracted by women. ~

Stri-rajya: The Suvarnagotra country [present Kumaon-Garhwal region] was ruled by a succession of women. The husband of the queen was king but he did not administer the government. The men attended only to the suppression of revolts and cultivation of the fields.

—Yuan Chwang

Steps to Women's Empowerment

SWAMI SHASHANKANANDA

It is largely held that women all over the world have been made to suffer discrimination and deprivation of various kinds since the beginning of time, that they have all along been denied even such basic rights as access to literacy and property. This global concern has steadily grown through the past few decades and has resulted in efforts to bring women into the mainstream of life, mainly through socio-economic activities aimed at empowering them and thus restoring equality between the sexes.

Though the concept of women's empowerment, as it is now understood, and the movement to achieve it are fairly recent Western phenomena, India has not escaped their influence. Women's empowerment was one of the primary objectives of the Ninth Five Year Plan, and the Government of India even declared the year 2001 'Women's Empowerment Year'. Backed by the government, policy planners and implementers are now concentrating on the task of removing gender disparities. The Tenth Five Year Plan reflects this endeavour in a big way. The challenge of making education and legal and property rights accessible to women is being met, and steps are being taken to ensure their financial security. Besides these fundamental rights, reservation of jobs and seats for women in Parliament, Legislative Assemblies and gram panchayats have become the burning issues of the day.

The Indian Woman: Decline in Her Status

In ancient India, however, woman was never an object of pity—neglected, weak and needing help. The pages of our cultural history are aglow with ideals like the scholarly Gargi and Maitreyi, the chaste Sita and Savitri, the devoted Parvati and that paragon of mothers, Madalasa. Far from being treated as a 'commodity', woman enjoyed the highest respect in society—that accorded to a 'mother'. As a matter of fact, she was looked upon as the veritable representation of Shakti, the source of all power, while today we are reduced to talking about empowering her. How strange! Even medieval Indian history is full of stories of heroic and learned women, not to speak of women saints.

The decline of Indian women's social status began with the arrival of foreign invaders. The purdah system that came into being then was devised with the best of intentions, that of keeping them from vulgar gaze. But alas, the road to hell is paved with good intentions! Stopped from stepping out of their houses, women had to go without education—and that gave birth to disparity. Illiterate and un-

educated, women gradually came to be looked down upon by men. So great was their suffering that they began to believe that they were born to suffer. And things came to such a sorry pass that when a daughter was born the parents grieved! This was the position of women in nine-



Women's meet



Education

teenth-century India.

The Indian Woman: Her Rise

At a time when some social reformers were still thinking of reintroducing education for women, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated the greatness of women and thus sowed the seeds of women's empowerment. He worshipped God as Shakti, accepted a woman as his guru, devotedly served his mother until her last day and worshipped his own wife as the Mother Goddess. Not only that, he left her behind to complete his mission of liberating humanity from bondage of every kind. Where else will we find a better example of women's empowerment? The relationship that existed between Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi was ideal in all respects. But it also shows that gender disparities are well and truly removed only when both men and women are 'educated' in the real sense of the word, when both have a sound understanding of inter-human relationships, and when both strive for spiritual unfoldment.

Women's empowerment aims at equal partnership and joint responsibility, with family duties distributed equally between man and wife. However, for the experiment to be successful, at least in the Indian context, one more vital element needs to be kept in focus: the entire experiment should be based on an awareness of the culture and spiritual values of the land. And mothers being the architects of their children's lives, their education has to

be given priority. Women are teachers as well as mothers. As the proverb goes, 'If you educate a man, you educate only one person; but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family.'

This was just the conclusion Swami Vivekananda came to after his travels in the West. There he saw women educated and free, and he dreamed of bringing education to the women of India. But his idea of women's education was slightly different from the 'modern' approach that we see today. Practical that he was, India's spiritual traditions formed the basis of his scheme of education. It was his firm belief that any programme of education that ignored national ideals was doomed to failure. Said he: 'Ideal characters must always be presented before the view of the girls to imbue them with a devotion to lofty principles of selflessness. The noble examples of Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Lilavati, Khana, and Mira should be brought home to their minds, and they should be inspired to mould their own lives in the light of these.' Obviously, Swamiji's feet were firmly planted on the cultural soil of India.

Ramakrishna Mission in Women's Welfare

Women really do not need to be empowered by men. In one of Swami Vivekananda's conversations we come across his strong views on the issue. He did not think it was possible for men to solve women's problems.



Capacity-building course



SHG formation

Their duty lay in providing education and opportunity to women, and once that was done women would automatically become capable of looking after themselves. This has been the Ramakrishna Mission's basic attitude to women's welfare and the philosophy underlying all its activities in this sphere. Let us now look at the work done by Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi, one of the Mission's model institutions, which has, of late, been giving more attention to gender sensitization in order to fight rural poverty.

The centre was started in 1927 and for the first four decades of its existence confined itself to some basic public-welfare work on a humble scale. But severe spells of drought in the 1960s galvanized its monks, who, not remaining contented with relief work, engaged themselves in serious attempts at evolving a lasting solution to the problem. It became clear to them that unless the resource-poor farmers of the area were empowered with need-based technology supported by group action, they would never be able to counter similar adverse conditions. It was by way of fulfilling this requirement that Divyayan ('the divine way'), an integrated rural development institute, was established in 1969. In this story, we shall see how Divyayan's integrated approach has been central to its success in securing economic security and self-respect for the weaker sections of society, how the formation of its women's self-help groups, with their knowledge, effort and skills, have been basic to

strengthening the wider community.

Education among Women

In the villages the monks observed that a large number of children, especially girls, were compelled by circumstances to remain at home to help their parents, either with domestic chores or out in the fields. In order that such children may avail themselves of basic education, the Ashrama started a chain of night schools and nutrition centers with the help of ex-trainees of Divyayan. On completion of their course at the night school the girls were encouraged to join regular schools. Today the centre runs 70 such rural night schools.

The year 2000 brought government recognition. The National Institute of Open Schooling accredited the Ashrama for its work in providing *Open Basic Education* (classes 1 to 8), *Academic Education* (secondary and senior secondary levels) and *Vocational Education* (secondary and higher secondary levels). By this time the centre was already running study centres and conducting examinations for students of classes 1 to 8 in the candidates' own villages. Till date, 333 students have benefited from these schools, with 500 more due to appear for the class 8 examination this year. Numbers aside, it is the penetration of the Ashrama's educational programmes that is noteworthy. A six-year-old girl who was obliged to be with her jailed mother took the



Group discussion



Incense-stick rolling

class 3 examination in the jail itself—and passed!—thanks to the programme's commitment.

The Sarvashiksha Abhiyan ('mass education drive') is another important project. The Ashrama now has 340 Sarvashiksha centres spread over three blocks of Ranchi district. It is their aim to ensure that no girl between ages 6 and 14 remains illiterate.

Capacity Building for Women

The Ashrama had launched its rural development programmes at a time when basic necessities of life such as food, shelter and health care, not to speak of education, were difficult of access to people of the surrounding areas. The condition of women was appalling,



Soap making

as they were quite neglected. Ideas like providing women opportunities for skill transformation, and such other services—indispensable necessities in the development process of a community—were still undreamt of. Though the centre saw that the quality of life of the womenfolk needed to be improved on a priority basis, it was difficult to address the problem forthwith. Since it had adopted an agriculture-oriented development approach, emphasis was placed on disseminating technology mostly among the menfolk. However, it soon made up for lost time.

Sometime in 1998, I visited Obar village to have an interaction with the farmers. That



Bee-keeping

day a few young women met me and expressed their grievances. Why were all the activities in the villages being done only for men? Women wanted something to be done for them too—so that they too could do something for the community in turn! Impressed by their enthusiasm and eagerness, I agreed to do something to mobilize the women through formation of self-help groups. In course of time, arrangements were also made to train womenfolk in bee-keeping, incense-stick making, towel weaving, tailoring, mushroom cultivation, poultry-farming and floriculture.

Self-Help Groups (SHG)

In 2001, the Swashakti Project, assisted by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank through



Pisciculture

the Jharkhand Women's Development Society and later through the Project for Formation of Self-Help Groups assisted by the Council for Advancement of People's Action in Rural Technology (CAPART), was launched. It was committed to empowering women in the area adopted by the Ashrama. SHGs were formed to strengthen entrepreneurial skills among marginalized women and empower them in order to sustain group ventures for micro enterprises. The idea was to eventually improve their economic and social status.

Under this plan, like-minded women living below the poverty line come together to discuss their common problems and try to solve them by forming an SHG. Despite their low-income/low-saving capacity, they make voluntary contributions to a common fund on a regular basis. This has enabled them to free themselves from dependence on and exploitation by private finance agencies; for them, life in perpetual debt is over. Not only that, these groups now use their pooled resources to make small interest-bearing loans to their members to meet their emergent needs, or to other income-generating programmes. Linkages are also set up with banks to give loans to SHGs in certain multiples at market interest rates.

All this demands a good deal of training (called 'capacity building') for members. Between January and September 2002, 691 members in 24 batches were trained by the Ashrama in leadership, conduct of group pro-

ceedings, panchayati raj, record-keeping and bookkeeping. The number of these SHGs has now reached 285.

The Impact of SHGs

More than helping develop micro-saving, micro-credit and micro-enterprise habits, the SHG methodology has proved to be a holistic approach. Its success has brought about tremendous change in women's outlook at grass-roots level. After undergoing the above-described training in capacity building, their awareness of social issues has increased, they have grown in self-confidence and decision-making ability, and they are also conscious of their social responsibilities. In just five years these women, mostly tribals, have outgrown their earlier attitudes. They are now bold enough to speak for themselves and to place their rightful demands before the concerned government officials. They are conscious of their strength and dignity. In short, they are now a voice to reckon with.

Here is the proof. In a recent interactive meeting, an SHG member revealed: 'Before joining the group we used to feel very lonely and distressed, but now we are many and united. We can rely on the group in times of emotional or financial crises. It steps in like a family to help us out. My husband used to beat me after consuming alcohol. One day I told him I would disclose it to our group. He



Poultry farming



Food processing

has given up drinking since then and behaves well with me now. We have gained self-dignity within the family as well as in society.'

Promotion of Self-reliance

After their course in capacity building, SHG members are given income-generation training in various skills. Different SHGs are engaged in different activities. As of now, 70 groups are engaged in diverse self-reliance projects like incense-stick rolling (5), pisciculture (7), mushroom cultivation (11), cattle breeding (14), poultry and dairy farming (8), vermi-compost making (8), soap making (3), weaving (3), tailoring (3), seed multiplication (2) and food processing (6).

The Ashrama has plans for teaching some more skills in the near future. These include cane-work, health work, integrated pest management, rice milling, spice grinding, lac production and silk production.

Achievements/Highlights

- *Incense-stick rolling*: A 10-member SHG that began as a small production unit overcame marketing problems by manufacturing according to demand and has itself become a training centre now.

- *Pisciculture*: Divyayan has constructed over 20 tanks in its adopted villages in order to introduce fish breeding based on scientifically proven techniques. The venture has been so problem-free and lucrative that four SHGs

have even taken tanks on lease from the government.

- *Poultry farming*: What began on an individual basis has now grown into a common phenomenon. Four SHGs, each member of the groups owning 10 birds of the special Divyayan Red breed, have earned a net profit of Rs 20,295.

- *Food processing*: An abundance of fruits and vegetables in Jharkhand encourages members of Mahila Swayam Sahayata Samuh to receive training in horticultural food processing. They have now started producing a variety of pickles, sauces and jellies.

- *Weaving*: On passing a six-week intensive course at Divyayan, 15 women linked up with Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and obtained Rs 25,000 as running capital for opening a weaving centre. District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Ranchi, sanctioned Rs 3,77,400 towards installation of looms and a workshed.

- *Non-conventional-energy appliance repairing*: A recent training programme for repairing solar lanterns, driers and cookers drew enthusiastic response.

SHGs in Health Care

The activities of the SHGs are not restricted to the economic aspect of welfare. Regular *health camps* are organized exclusively for women where treatment and medicines



Solar-lantern repairing



Health meet

are given free of charge. The Ashrama has also formed village health committees and trained health workers to conduct health programmes for tuberculosis, malaria and leprosy control. A six-month *accupressure* course was organized at Divyayan, as a result of which 146 girls received training in this science. Village women are quite taken with this novel, low-cost therapy.

The Basis of Empowerment

Real empowerment of women, however, lies in helping them unfold the spiritual aspect of their personality, build up their character and manifest their purity and motherhood. It is these that make up the character of the ideal Indian woman; earning capacity and public status are secondary. All women are parts of the same infinite divine Power, and hence divine. Fully re-

alizing the importance and urgency of the uplift of women, if we are to save our cultural traditions and spiritual values and counter the negative trends that are now affecting our body politic, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi, has been putting in much effort to promote spiritual values in rural women's lives. It conducts regular conventions for them to make them aware of their true power. SHGs too organize cultural and value-orientation programmes and other meetings on their own for their all-round development. Recently, one such conference was attended by 1700 members.

Empowerment is complete only when a given community takes full control of its own



Convention

development and the implementing agency, much like a catalytic agent, remains in the background after initiating the process of change. This is exactly what the Ashrama does: once the machinery it has set up is in working order, it hands over the management of affairs to the grass-root organization or SHG, and itself remains in the background to provide motivation and guidance from time to time.

As Swami Vivekananda said, 'Our duty is to put the chemicals together, the crystallisation will come through God's laws. Let us put ideas into their heads, and they will do the rest.'

~



Educational tour

The Prose Style of Swami Vivekananda

PROF. U S RUKHAIYAR

(Continued from the previous issue)

Antithesis and Balance

Vivekananda has made fine use of antithesis and balance: 'When I eat food, I do it consciously; when I assimilate it, I do it unconsciously';⁶ 'Nature is trying all around to *suppress* us, and the soul wants to *express* itself' (4.240); 'The lower the organism, the greater is its pleasure in the senses. ... The higher the organism, the lesser is the pleasure of the senses' (4.242); 'It is better to die seeking a God than as a dog seeking only carrion' (7.45); 'Gifts of political knowledge can be made with the blast of trumpets and the march of cohorts. Gifts of secular knowledge and social knowledge can be made with fire and sword. But spiritual knowledge can only be given in silence like the dew that falls unseen and unheard, yet bringing into bloom masses of roses' (3.222). In the last passage, mark the harsh sounds that suggest harsh action. It is to be noted that herein the contrast in sense has been suggested through contrast of sounds.

Paradox

We have earlier taken note of Vivekananda's use of the paradox. Some more appropriate examples may be cited: 'To be religious, you have first to throw books overboard' (4.34). And again, in a similar vein: 'But, in my opinion books have produced more evil than good. They are accountable for many mischievous doctrines' (4.44).

Followers of all religions say that God is one. But the books of different religions differ in details. Followers mistake the details for the essence and forget the substance of religion. It has rightly been said that more blood has been shed on account of differences between reli-

gions than anything else. Perhaps it is this that led Swift to observe: 'We Christians have just enough religion to hate, but not enough to make us love, one another.'⁷

Vivekananda says: 'Liberation means entire freedom—freedom from the bondage of good, as well as from the bondage of evil. A golden chain is as much a chain as an iron one';⁸ 'The gods did not create man after their type, but man created gods' (2.325); 'Good and evil have an equal share in moulding character, and in some instances misery is a greater teacher than happiness' (1.27). There is no need to mention that these paradoxes are not only witty but also contain great truths.

Indignation, Sarcasm, Irony

Vivekananda has also made use, though sparingly, of indignation, sarcasm and irony. For indignation, we may look at the following: 'So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them'(5.58); 'They ask us for bread, but we give them stones. It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics' (1.20). And further: 'If one of our countrymen stands up and tries to become great, we all try to hold him down, but if a foreigner comes and tries to kick us, it is all right' (3.300). Note the sarcasm in the following: 'Before we can crawl half a mile, we want to cross the ocean like Hanuman!' (3.301).

For irony we may look at the following: 'Well has it been said that the masses admire the lion that kills a thousand lambs, never for a moment thinking that it is death to the lambs' (2.65). Stronger is the irony in the following

passage: 'And in its (spirituality's) place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force, and competition its ceremonies, and the human soul its sacrifice' (4.348). Here Vivekananda has used the mock-epic device by pairing the trivial with the sublime, a device common in Dryden and Pope. Here satire contains a strong caution. It is free from the contempt of Dryden, the hatred of Pope, the disgust of Swift or the devastation of Voltaire and Rabelais. That may be because Vivekananda's belief in the essential divinity of man forbids him to ridicule man outright; Vivekananda is not an ironist or satirist but rather a religious humanist.

Interrogation

Vivekananda makes frequent use of interrogation. This helps him in arousing the curiosity of the reader as also in inviting his participation in the deliberations. 'By what power is this Akasha manufactured into this universe? By the power of Prana' (1.147). It is to be noted that the words *akasha* and *prana* have been left untranslated into English, because neither 'sky' nor 'life' can cover the rich connotation of these two Sanskrit words. This shows his awareness of the nuances of language. 'Can religion really accomplish anything? It can. ... Take religion from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes' (3.4); 'Is man a tiny boat? ... Is there no hope? Is there no escape?' (1.10); 'What is the foundation of society? Morality, ethics, laws. ... What is marriage but the renunciation of unchastity? The savage does not marry. Man marries because he renounces' (4.243). Such interrogations serve several purposes: first, they make the tone informal; second, they arouse the curiosity of the reader; third, they add force to the statement.

Repetition

Vivekananda uses repetition to stress his point. In his famous Chicago speech of 11 Sep-

tember 1893 he repeats 'I thank you' three times in a paragraph of seven lines. And he begins the next paragraph with 'My thanks'. In that paragraph he says 'I am proud to belong' three times and 'I am proud to tell you' once.

Look at the force of *all* and *extinct* in the following passage: 'Shall India die? Then from the world *all* spirituality will be *extinct*, *all* moral perfection will be *extinct*, *all* sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be *extinct*, *all* ideality will be *extinct*' (4.348). It gives an impression of waves rising upon waves.

Verbs

Vivekananda often uses verbs to literally suggest action. 'They have *filled* the earth with violence, *drenched* it often and often with human blood, *destroyed* civilisation and *sent* whole nations to despair' (1.4). All four finite verbs used above are stressed. They suggest the intensity of the acts. '*Work* incessantly, but *do not do* slave's work. *Do you not see* how everybody works? ... *Work* through freedom! *Work* through love!' (1.57). Here all the verbs are in the imperative and stressed. The repetition of the word *work* suggests persuasion or exhortation. '*Fight* and *reason* and *argue*; and when you have established it in your mind that this and this alone can be the truth and nothing else, *do not argue* any more; *close* your mouth' (3.27). These lines combine a biblical simplicity with a persuasive tone. The imperative mood has been very effectively used to communicate powerful ideas.

Alliteration

Vivekananda is also alive to the need for sweetness in language. This he creates by several means, chief among them being alliteration and assonance. But he also uses harsh sounds, when called for, to suggest harshness of action. For the alliteration of *k* we may note the following: 'calm the *qualms* of conscience' (1.292); of *l*: 'lust and luxury' (4.348); of *s*: 'sweet-souled sympathy' (4.348); and of *w*: 'weep and wail' (2.357).

It is to be noted that Vivekananda has an awareness of euphony and cacophony too. Perhaps that is why he uses soft sounds when he has to suggest a good thing and harsh sounds when he has to suggest evil. Since sympathy is a virtue he uses the soft *s*, but when he has to suggest ugliness he uses a harsh sound instead. For example: 'dashed down' (1.10) in the passage already cited; 'Sec-tarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism' (1.4), where most of the words are polysyllabic and jarring; 'Gifts of political knowledge can be made with the *blast of trumpets* and the *march of cohorts*' (3.222), where the sounds are almost onomatopoeic; 'One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the *dark designs* of millions of hypocrites and brutes' (5.127), where the virtuous *single soul* has the *s* sound whereas *dark designs*, *hypocrites* and *brutes* show their harsh character by their very sounds.

Assonance

Assonance refers to the similarity of vowel sounds, and Vivekananda's prose uses it to generate poetic effect. For the assonance of the *e* and *ei* sounds we may look at the following passage: 'The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration' (1.4). For the assonance of the *ou* and *o* sounds: 'The *soul* will go on evolving' (1.10). For the assonance of *a:iai* and *ju* sounds: 'Why waste *valuable time* in *vain arguments*?' (3.27). This line also contains the alliteration of *w* and *v* sounds. For the assonance of *i* sound: '*ideality* will be extinct' (4.348). The last three words are contiguous and this creates a greater degree of harmony.

But the matter does not end there. It is generally believed that short vowels like *i* and *u* suggest nearness and long vowels like *a:* and *e:*, distance. A good craftsman uses them accordingly. When Keats wants to say that the song of the nightingale leads the listener to a (naturally distant) fairyland, he uses long

vowels to say it: 'Charm'd magic casements, opening on the *foam* of perilous *seas*, in *faery* lands *forlorn*.' Similarly, de la Mare opens his poem 'Arabia' as follows: '*Far* are the shades of Arabia.'

Vivekananda is also alive to this artifice. When he exhorts the youth to march ahead, he uses long vowels, and towards the end longer ones, that too contiguously, a feature that suggests marching a long distance: 'Have *faith* in yourselves, *great* convictions are the mothers of *great* deeds. Onward for ever! Sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, even unto death—this is our motto. Onward, brave *lads*!' (5.30).

Let us look at the following passage: 'In Sri Ramakrishna there has been an assemblage of ideas deeper than the sea and vaster than the skies' (7.411). It shows a masterstroke of craftsmanship. 'Deeper than the sea' suggests a vertical movement and so the sound *i:* suits it. Shelley uses this sound in the third verse of his 'West Wind': 'Thou/For whose path the Atlantic's level powers/*Cleave themselves into chasms*.' The west wind is to go deep into the ocean and so there is *cleave* with the long vowel *i:* And when it goes deep it will create a *chasm*, which has the long *a:*. Similarly, 'vaster than the skies' in the given passage, by the use of the long *a:*, suggests horizontal expansion or extension.

Such felicitous use of sound effects suggests that Vivekananda had a very high degree of awareness of sound—alliteration, assonance, euphony, cacophony, long and short vowels, and so forth—as also of how to use them appropriately.

Rhythm, Harmony, Cadence

One of the most remarkable qualities of Vivekananda's prose style is its fine rhythm, cadence and harmony. Northrop Frye has classified rhythm into prose rhythm, poetic rhythm and associative rhythm. The fact is that none of these three is ever found in its purity. Each gets mixed with another and one or

the other predominates at one time or another. Vivekananda generally uses associative rhythm, which sometimes turns into poetic rhythm and sometimes into prose rhythm. Associative rhythm is the common conversational rhythm. The illustration of rhythm, cadence and harmony calls for a longish citation. The famous Chicago address illustrates several of the aforesaid features:

Is man a "tiny boat in a "tempest, 'raised one moment on the "foamy crest of a 'billow and dashed down into a 'yawning 'chasm the next, rolling 'to and 'fro at the 'mercy of 'good and 'bad actions—a "powerless, "helpless wreck in an "ever-raging, "ever-rushing, "uncompromising 'current of 'cause and 'effect; a "little moth 'placed under the "wheel of cau"sation which 'rolls on "crushing everything in its way and "waits not for the "widow's tears or the orphan's cry? The 'heart sinks at the idea, "yet 'this is the law of Nature. 'Is there no 'hope? 'Is there "no 'escape?—"was the 'cry that 'went up from the "bottom of the 'heart of 'despair. It 'reached the "throne of 'mercy, and "words of 'hope and conso'lation 'came down and ins'pired a 'Vedic sage, and he "stood up before the world and in 'trumpet voice proclaimed the 'glad 'tidings: "Hear, ye 'children of im"mortal bliss! even "ye that re"side in 'higher s'pheres! I have 'found the 'Ancient One who is be"yond 'all 'darkness, 'all de"lusion: knowing Him a"lone you shall be 'saved from death "over a"gain (1.10).

The first thing that strikes us here is that the movement of the lines looks like that of waves on the ocean going up and down, now moving this side, now that, mixing with other waves, and taking new shapes. This has additional significance here since the context is also of a boat sailing in the sea. It may well be said to be an example of the fusion of feeling and form, one of the essentials of good creative art. The allocation of stress, as indicated by the markings, differs from sentence to sentence. It does not have the regularity or monotony of regular accent, metre or rhyme but yet it has a natural rhythm. In the very first sentence, the first stress is on the fourth syllable, *ti*, and the

second on the ninth syllable, *tem*, that is, at a separation of five syllables. Then it is on *raised*, which comes after a gap of only one unaccented syllable. Next there is an alteration of single stress and double stress, the more important words having double stress as the markings in the passage suggest. But the two contiguous words *dashed down* both have double stress. This enhances the effect of dashing, *d* being a hard sound. Further, in the stress pattern, *tiny* corresponds with *tempest*. Their size and sound also suggest the difference in their nature and power. Another subtle effect to be noted in the first few lines is the assonance of *e* and *ei* in *tempest*, *raised*, moment and *crest*, of *ou* in *boat*, *moment*, *foamy* and *billow*, and of *i*: and *i* in *foamy* and *billow*.

Thus, several of the contiguous syllables are stressed, some of them strongly and with only a little gap of unstressed words. For example, 'powerless, helpless wreck in an ever-raging, ever-rushing' produces a visual impact of waves. It is an example of phanopoeia (visual effect). Thus *uncompromising* densifies the *ever-raging* and *ever-rushing* current of cause and effect. The addition of *helpless* densifies *powerless*. *Uncompromising* is an example of personification and carries a spiritual overtone. All three words end with '-ing'. This creates melopoeia (auditory effect). James Sutherland, in his book *On English Prose*, says: 'Prose, it may be said, should be heard and not seen.' Somerset Maugham also, in his book *The Summing Up*, says: 'Words have weight, sound and appearance; it is only by considering these that you can write a sentence that is good to look at and good to listen to.' Thus, these two together stimulate logopoeia (intellectual or emotional associations that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or group of words employed).

We may look at the cadence—the rise and fall of the following units inflected at 'rolls on' and 'waits not': '... which rolls on crushing everything in its way and waits not for the

widow's tears or the orphan's cry'. All three effects are there in just one sentence. The sentence is long but not clumsy: it does not have too many clauses, either coordinate or subordinate.

It may not be out of place here to say that Aurobindo's prose, though it has several virtues, often lacks the ease and flow of Vivekananda's. Let us take a representative passage from Aurobindo: 'In the right view both of life and of Yoga all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga. For we mean by this term a methodical effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the potentialities latent in the being and a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence we see partially expressed in man and in the Cosmos.'⁹ The cluttered clauses in the second sentence of the passage make it a bit clumsy.

To revert to the passage we have been discussing, we mark that the first long sentence is followed by a very short one: 'The heart sinks at the idea, yet this is the law of Nature.' This suggests the feeling of the heart being arrested by the law of nature. The length of the sentences mimic the fall of a wave and its breaking up into smaller parts. Next, there is a rising movement, and that in short bursts: 'Is there no hope? Is there no escape?' Soon the interrogative turns into the assertive. Doubt is raised so that hope may soothe it, and so it does.

Vivekananda prefers to give his sentences monosyllabic endings, *in general*. But monosyllables need to be handled with care. Their merit lies in imparting emphasis, but their excessive use makes for jerky prose, as it often does in Carlyle. As has rightly been said, 'The monosyllable is one of the characteristics of English as compared with the classical languages, Greek and Latin, and is used chiefly for emphasis. ... Fullness of sound is also valuable because monosyllables not only arrest attention by emphasis but also retard the movement of the sentence, thus causing the atten-

tion of the reader to linger over them.'¹⁰ It seems Vivekananda was aware of this. It can be seen even in the passages quoted in this article that he succeeds in laying emphasis by giving monosyllabic endings to his sentences. The entire corpus of his prose shows a preference for monosyllables. But, when called for, Vivekananda makes generous use of polysyllabic endings too. This variation makes for a better rhythm. Saintsbury rightly says that 'variety' is the principle of prose rhythm.¹¹ Prof. Elton also says that in good prose 'cadences' do not appear as a fixed system (as do rhymes in poetry) because this would induce expectancy and tend to make the composition metrical.¹² Though Vivekananda had no formal training in these subtleties of art, yet his genius and intuition seems to have known it more thoroughly than so many professed practitioners of this art.

Thus we find sound matching sense, rhythmic rise and flow, controlled cadence, and harmony created by various linguistic devices, all harmonized into an organic whole. Romain Rolland rightly compares Vivekananda's prose style to a symphony, a musical composition of a high order. There are several such passages in Vivekananda's speeches and writings which show a fine rise and fall of rhythm, harmony and cadence. We may look at one more such passage:

"Thou "blessed 'land of the 'Aryas, thou wast "never de"graded. 'Sceptres have been "broken and "thrown away, the "ball of "power has "passed from 'hand to 'hand, but in 'India, "courts and "kings always 'touched only a 'few; the "vast mass of the 'people, from the 'highest to the 'lowest, has been 'left to pursue its 'own in"evitable course, the 'current of 'national life 'flowing at times 'slow and 'half-conscious, at others, "strong and a"wakened. I "stand in 'awe before the "un'broken pro'cession of "scores of 'shining 'centuries, with here and 'there a "dim link in the "chain, only to 'flare up with "added 'brilliance in the 'next, and "there she is 'walking with her own ma'jestic 'steps—my "motherland—to 'ful"fil her "glorious des'tiny, which "no 'power on earth or in

'heaven can "check—the "regeneration of 'man the "brute into 'man the "God."¹³

The marking of stress in the above-quoted passage shows the rise and fall of cadence—the alternation of love and resolve, pride and shame, and so on. The last sentence has poetic imagery and rhythm that ends in a crescendo. A detailed analysis of the passage will reveal many more beauties of style.

Conclusion

So we see that Vivekananda's style has almost all the qualities of good prose. It also shows how expository prose is often enriched by persuasive and emotive prose without impairing its primary virtue, which is clarity. If we compare his style with that of other great masters, we may say that he has combined the ease and grace of Dryden with the raciness of Hazlitt. He does not have the ornateness of Pater or Ruskin, but he has the simplicity of Hemingway and the force, colour and music of Lawrence. Among the Indian masters of English prose, we may say that he has the natural flair of Nehru and the music of Tagore. His religious and philosophical preoccupations invite comparison with Aurobindo. But as shown earlier, Aurobindo's prose often becomes heavy or clumsy despite its other virtues. What a happy coincidence it is that this great champion of the harmony of religions has written in a prose which is itself one of the

finest examples of harmony! Here thought and language match each other. His prose well illustrates the dictum: 'The style is the man'.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that Vivekananda's prose style has few parallels. We find therein a blend of so many elements that it is difficult to reduce it to any neat or mechanical classification. Vivekananda's prose style deserves to be a subject of detailed study or full-length research. It is hoped that critics and scholars will wake up to this noble task and bring to light the myriad shades of the literary style of this great master. At present, it still is 'a gift unopened'. ~

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Style

Nothing is so difficult as the apparent ease of a clear and flowing style; those graces, which from this presumed facility encourage all to attempt an imitation of them, are usually the most inimitable. —Colton

When we see a natural style, we are quite astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author, and we find a man. —Pascal

No artificial language can ever have that force, and that brevity and expressiveness, or admit of being given any turn you please, as that spoken language. Language must be made like pure steel—turn and twist it any way you like, it is again the same—it cleaves a rock in twain at one stroke, without its edge being turned. —Swami Vivekananda

A New York Times Report on Swamiji

HAD NO MEATS AT THE DINNER

Members of V Club Hear About the Vegetarian Diet of the Far East.

The second vegetarian dinner of the V Club was held at the St. Denis Hotel, Broadway and Eleventh Street, last night. About fifty members were present.

Only vegetables and fruits appeared on the menu, and sterilized water, chocolate, coffee, and tea made up the drinkables.

Between the toasts several original songs were rendered by J. Williams Macy.

S. C. T. Dodd replied to the toast "Vanity," and Mary T. Burt, in the absence of Mrs. Ella Dietz Clymer, to that of "Virtue."

Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu of high caste, said that vegetarianism had its beginning in India. "It is often stated," he said, "that because Hindus believe in transmigration of souls they would not kill and eat animals because they feared that they would eat some of their ancestors. There is not a word of truth in this statement. Some of the greatest propagandists of vegetarianism do not believe in God nor in a soul. Therefore, the fear of eating one of their ancestors could not affect them."

"Nearly three-quarters of the people of India are vegetarians. They are so because they are too kind to kill animals for food."

"In this country, when animals are injured, it is the custom to kill them. In India it is the rule to send them to a hospital. In approaching Bombay, the first thing the traveler comes across is a very large hospital for animals. This has been the practice for 1,000 years."

Mrs. J. De la M. Lozier, Vice President of Sorosis, told about the little vices of men. The first one was drunkenness. Men came home and hid themselves behind a newspaper. They never had anything pleasant to say. A woman who had been married forty years said to her husband: "I wish you would tell me that you love me. It is so long since you said it that I would like to hear how it sounds."

Another vice was loquaciousness or scolding. Perhaps this was not a common vice. But some husbands were very nice when they were away from home and very disagreeable when by the fireside. One woman called her husband "a street angel." When he died she refused to wear mourning. Other little vices were smoking, the use of slang, and insincerity, or the trying to appear to be what they were not.

St. Clair McKelway replied to the arguments of some of the other speakers in a humorous vein.

Swami Vivekananda on Meat-eating

About vegetarian diet I have to say this—first, my Master was a vegetarian; but if he was given meat offered to the Goddess, he used to hold it up to his head. The taking of life is undoubtedly sinful; but so long as vegetable food is not made suitable to the human system through progress in chemistry, there is no other alternative but meat-eating. So long as man shall have to live a Rajasika (active) life under circumstances like the present, there is no other way except through meat-eating. It is true that the Emperor Asoka saved the lives of millions of animals, by the threat of the sword; but is not the slavery of a thousand years more dreadful than that? Taking the life of a few goats as against the inability to protect the honour of one's own wife and daughter, and to save the morsels for one's children from robbing hands—which of these is more sinful? Rather let those belonging to the upper ten, who do not earn their livelihood by manual labour, not take meat; but the forcing of vegetarianism upon those who have to earn their bread by labouring day and night is one of the causes of the loss of our national freedom. Japan is an example of what good and nourishing food can do.

—Complete Works, 4.486-7

All liking for fish and meat disappears when pure Sattva is highly developed, and these are the signs of its manifestation in a soul: sacrifice of everything for others, perfect non-attachment to lust and wealth, want of pride and egotism. The desire for animal food goes when these things are seen in a man. And where such indications are absent, and yet you find men siding with the non-killing party, know it for a certainty that here there is either hypocrisy or a show of religion.

—Ibid, 5.403

Facsimile of report in
The New York Times
2 May 1894

Glimpses of Holy Lives

Rani Ahalyabai: Centred in Yoga

Through her many qualities, this divine lady was an ornament not only to Maharashtra, but to entire humankind. ... Her virtue was so all-embracing that in every aspect of dharma and conduct she had her fame immortalized. Her munificence was so great that till today it remains unparalleled in Hindustan. Her justice was so correct that both businessmen and thieves blessed her. Her humility was so natural that she never allowed anyone to praise her. Her supervision was so strict that no state functionary could act without her permission or bring her to disrepute. ... She was so unavaricious that she never aspired after other states nor tried to increase her property holdings by burdening others. Her kindness to living beings was so broad that her concern extended even to animals and birds.

Although this appraisal of Rani Ahalyabai's excellences by Chintaman V Vaidya was made over a hundred years after her death in 1795, this was an assessment that her contemporaries, both friendly and hostile, would have ungrudgingly attested to. For Ahalyabai, unlike the proverbial prophets, was an object of veneration even in her own times.

At a time when degeneracy and despotism were the rule, Ahalyabai built up a genuine welfare state through her wisdom and sagacity. Her biographer, Mukund W Burway, observes:

Light assessment was the great boon she conferred on the agricultural classes generally. It was the basis of the prosperity and contentment of the whole class of kirsans (peasantry) who were undoubtedly happy under Ahilyabai's regime. She never encouraged forced labour, the bane of all barbarous or unenlightened rules. She respected the rights of village officers and proprietors of lands, whereby the Rayat had confidence in the good faith of her administration and regarded her almost with religious veneration. ... Ahilyabai's treatment of her offi-

cers and servants was sympathetic and liberal, combined with mild severity and stern justice.

The numerous petty Rajput Chiefs, tributaries and neighbours were treated fairly and amicable settlements were made with them in such a manner as to enable them to maintain themselves decently. This led to the peace and contentment of the Rajput neighbours, who blessed Ahilyabai for her disinterested and generous behaviour towards them, and always remained attached to her side. Ahilyabai's settlement with the criminal tribes of Gonds and Bheels ... were as satisfactory as her other arrangements. Conciliatory measures were tried at first, and when they failed, she had recourse to a more rigorous system, incorrigible offenders being put to death, though ... such instances of severe justice were very rare ...

No person of her time was more respected than Ahilyabai. The Mahomedans vied with their Hindu brethren in doing honour to her and admiring her extraordinary virtues and charity. To incur her displeasure was sufficient to ensure a social degradation and a loss of reputation. Such was her hold on the Indian mind.

In his celebrated work *Memoirs of Central India* Sir John Malcolm writes: 'Among the Princes of her own nation, it would have been looked upon as sacrilege to have become her enemy, or, indeed, not to have defended her against any hostile attempt. She was considered by all in the same light. The Nizam of the Deccan and Tippoo Sultan granted her the same respect as the Paishwah.'

But Ahalyabai was not born with a silver spoon in her mouth, and her personal life was punctuated with tragedies. Born into the family of a petty village patil in Aurangabad she was married at the age of eight to Khanderao Holkar, the nondescript son of Malhar Rao Holkar, who himself was then rising from being a small-time horseman to the founder of the Holkar state of Malwa. Khanderao was ac-

cidentally killed by a cannonball while on an expedition with his father near Bharatpur. Ahalyabai was then only nineteen and was prevented from becoming a sati only by the earnest importunities of her parents-in-law, who, having lost their only son, now looked upon Ahalyabai as their son.

If Ahalyabai imbibed the devotion, piety, and spirited nature of her mother-in-law, Gautamabai, she was trained in administration by Malhar Rao. When the latter was away on military expeditions, it was Ahalyabai who managed the household affairs as well as the jagirs. She also supervised the casting of cannons and small firearms, the preparation of ammunition, and such other functions, and oversaw the artillery. All this was done under explicit directions from Malhar Rao, who used to regularly communicate with her even from the battlefield.

Malhar Rao died in 1766 and his successor, Ahalyabai's son Malerao, too died the next year after a spell of insanity. Ahalyabai was now left alone facing a scheming minister, Gangadhar Chandrachud, who was backed by Raghoba Dada, the uncle of the Peshwa, Madhav Rao I. Chadrachud wanted Ahalyabai to adopt a minor son, so that he could wield de facto power, whilst Raghoba wanted the Peshwa to attach Ahalyabai's estate. Ahalyabai would not give in to such machinations. She established personal contacts with the Peshwa and his noble wife, Ramabai, and the former soon issued an order ratifying Ahalyabai's succession to the Holkar state.

Ahalyabai maintained very cordial relations with the Peshwas, with Mahadaji Scindia, who was at the height of his powers then, and with other neighbours. She also had her own vakils in Kolkata, Hyderabad, Srirangapattana, Lucknow, Pune, and Nagpur to coordinate her business, public relations and diplomacy. But it was not mere diplomatic soft power that she wielded. The modest but efficient Holkar army performed creditably under Tukoji Holkar, Ahalyabai's trusted commandant.

She even raised a women's regiment to confront Raghoba when the latter assumed a threatening stance. Once when the Chandrawat Rajputs annexed Rampura and threatened the Scindia territory, the ladies of Mahadaji's family wanted to move over to Ahalyabai's capital at Maheshwar for the sake of safety. Ahalyabai wrote back that although they were always welcome, their prestige would suffer if they came over at that time. Instead, if need be, she would be with them in nine hours' time even as her own army was moving to tackle the menace.

Fate struck another cruel blow on Ahalyabai when her only daughter Muktabai committed sati in 1791 after her lone son and husband died in quick succession. That Ahalyabai could withstand all these shocks and continue her ministration speaks volumes for her courage and fortitude. Her deep personal faith and a disciplined spiritual life were the wellsprings of this fortitude. Her day began an hour before sunrise with prayer and puja. And these, along with scriptural readings and charities, occupied the entire morning, interrupted only by a light breakfast. Her durbar from two to six in the afternoon was followed by two to three hours of devotions, a frugal supper and then business again from nine to eleven. She maintained this routine to the last days of her life till she gave up her body 'very carefully', 'having recited the divine name' (as recorded in the *Holkar Kaya-fiyat*) on the banks of the Narmada.

The temples of Vishwanath, Somnath and Vishnu at Varanasi, Saurashtra and Gaya, the Manikarnika Ghat at Varanasi, the Kolkata-Varanasi highway, the daily *abhisheka* of Shiva at Rameshwaram with Ganga water brought all the way from northern India, and the endowment for pilgrims at Kedarnath in the Himalayas are all silent witnesses to the yoga of action, in which was centred the being of this remarkable queen, for whom devotion to the divine had become inseparable from enlightened rulership.

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Reviews



For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.

The Message of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Swami Ranganathananda. Advaita Ashrama, 5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata 700 014. E-mail: advaita@vsnl.com. 2005. 740 pp. Rs 150.

Swami Ranganathanandaji's exposition of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* starts off where his Bhagavadgita left off—both temporally and in spirit. In the last class on the Gita he remarks that in the next class he will take up the Upaniṣad under review. In spirit too, there is a marked sense of continuity. If the Gita deals with the technology of spiritual enquiry (in terms of method), the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* deals with the science of spirituality. Here, the focus is not so much on specific practices or methods as on the analysis of, and the attitude behind the spiritual quest. The exposition combines in it the best elements of science and Vedānta. The method of enquiry is that of science—objective and universal, through impartial observation and deduction guided by a deep longing for Truth. This is the scientific method at its best. The object of enquiry, on the other hand, is the subjective or depth dimension of man, which in turn is Vedānta at its most sublime. In effecting this synthesis, the author has made practical the synthesis between science and Vedānta that Swami Vivekananda envisaged, and he has also brought together the breadth and depth dimensions of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedānta philosophy. He has thus pioneered a holistic approach that cannot but meet with eager reception amongst serious scientific minds—philosophers and spiritual aspirants alike.

The Introduction and Chapter One of the book set the tone for what is to come. The author urges us to push the scientific quest beyond the senses. He clearly brings out the fact that the restriction of our field of enquiry to the physical world is unwarranted, and that an expansion of this field is essential, first to the field of human values and then to the field of the spirit, if science is to hope to encompass all of human experience within its ambit.

While discussing mantra 1.4.7, he shows clearly

the transcendence of mind over the brain, quoting neurologist Wilbur Penfield's observational findings in his support. The author's account of *brahma-vidyā* is novel, embracing both *parā* and *aparā vidyā*—a line of thought he returns to at the end of the book while summarizing the main themes. Again, in the exposition of mantra 1.4.10, the mantra that contains the *mahāvākya* 'aham brahmāsmi', he indicates how an enquiry into the Atman is, in essence, an enquiry that tries to transcend all limitations. 'Atah kim, atah kim? What next, what next?' is the underlying music of the quest. The Atman lies beyond the senses, and hence the framework of physical science is inadequate for it. The Atman also lies beyond the cogitative mind, and hence traditional scholasticism with its polemical armoury cannot circumscribe it. This feeling of 'not just this, not just this' is at the basis of the *neti-neti vicāra* of the jñāna yogi—a fact that is more than adequately exemplified in the earnest enquiry into Truth that formed, along with solidarity with all humankind, the twin pillars of Swami Ranganathanandaji's life in general, and Vedāntic expositions in particular.

The second chapter focusses on the nature of the subject, but the basis is scriptural. Hence it takes up, one by one, the traditional understanding of the human psychophysical system, which comprised the accepted wisdom of the age, and points out the way beyond. Hence there is an enquiry into the three states of awareness (*avasthā-traya*)—waking, dream and deep sleep—with a view to finding out the real nature of the Atman which lies beyond. The famous 'Yajñavalkya-Maitreyi Dialogue' is given a modern treatment and the focus of love traced to the Atman—the Self of man. Universal solidarity—a favourite theme of Swami Vivekananda's—is dealt with in the mantras that seek to unify all knowledge and all experience. One example is the unification of all energy in Prāṇa. The author takes this unification to a deeper level and finds the focus of all human experience in the Atman. This is the rationale, the *raison d'être* behind the enquiry into the *avasthā-traya*. In the 'Madhuvidyā', the concluding section of the second chapter, the interdependence

of all creation and the universal nature of the Atman, that is to say, its nature as underlying all existence—both individual and cosmic—is delineated. Thus the identity of the Atman with Brahman is established.

In Chapters Three and Four—the ‘Muni Kāṇḍa’ or ‘Yajñavalkya Kāṇḍa’—the emphasis is more on rational enquiry than on scriptural evidence. Chapter Three consists of a series of dialogues between scholars in King Janaka’s court and Yajñavalkya. This can be thought of as the analogue of a present-day scientific conference. In the dialogue with Uṣasta, the experiential nature of Brahman is stressed. Hence the statement: ‘This is Brahman.’ Here, *This* refers to the deeper nature of all objective reality, just as *I* refers to the real nature of the subject. The author deals with the ‘science of spiritual development’ or the ‘inner science’, or, in the words of Huxley, the ‘science of human possibilities’. The reader is urged not to remain satisfied with his present understanding of things but to probe towards a more comprehensive picture. In the next dialogue with Kahola, the ‘Psychology of Desire’ is investigated. Our own infinite nature is waiting to be explored. It does not behove us, therefore, to resort to beggarliness, to be slaves to the little objects of desire. In the ‘Antaryāmi Brāhmaṇa’, the author deals with the theme of bhakti, or devotion to the ‘Inner Ruler’—the ruler of both the individual and the cosmos. Thus, bhakti, the dominant theme of Viśiṣṭadvaita is understood against an Advaitic backdrop. In the ‘Gārgi Brāhmaṇa’ the final transcendental nature of Brahman is exposed. Though immanent and interpenetrating all, it has a transcendental dimension, which can only be grasped by shedding our individual or phenomenal limitations. The author concludes the chapter with an exposition of the terms *viśaya* and *viśayi*—subject and object—the two possible fields of any process of enquiry, and shows that they are the dual dimensions of the same field of knowledge, *brahmavidyā*, which has Brahman as its basis.

Chapter Four starts with the one essential quality or value that marks off the knower of Brahman—fearlessness. Once the fear of death is conquered, all fear is conquered, for this fear originates in the fear of losing the body, through which we identify with every object we regard as *me* or *mine*. It is knowledge that destroys this fear. Scientific knowledge gives us power over nature and consequently removes the fear of external nature. But it

also makes us dimly aware of subtler powers working within us and in society. Hence, paradoxically, it increases fear by pushing it into an inchoate and half-understood twilight. Ignorance of our subjective dimension lies at the basis of this existential fear. Spiritual knowledge alone can destroy it. Spiritual enquiry, effected here by the twofold process of *avasthā-traya prakriyā* and *neti, neti*, reveals the deeper nature of the subject and comprehensively destroys fear. In this chapter the author uses the commentary of Sri Shankaracharya and his analysis of the three states to effectively counter the materialistic challenge. This challenge is powerful today because of the scientific hypothesis that matter is enough to explain, at least in principle, all phenomena. But the enquiry into the three states, especially deep sleep, reveals a dimension of the subject that no materialistic analysis can hope to encompass. This analysis forms the basis of the process of Advaitic enquiry.

In Chapter Five, the author gives an account of the well-known story of ‘*da, da, da*’—Prajapati’s instructions to gods, men and demons. The author links it to the shloka of the Gita that says lust, anger and greed are the gates to hell. Hence the need to practice self-control, charity, and compassion. The rest of Chapters Five and Six, dealing with certain rites and meditations, is not discussed.

The exposition of the Upanishad concludes with a summary of the principal themes dealt with in the book. These lectures were given in the eighties and the passage of time has only made us feel more keenly the need for such expositions. While not compromising a whit on scholastic depth, the elucidation penetrates deeper into the experiential relevance of Vedanta. It is this alone that can ennoble and uplift us in these days when we can no longer hope for the good fortune of benefiting directly from listening to the lectures of the doyen of Vedanta that Swami Ranganathanandaji was.

A Monastic

The Variegated Plumage: Encounters with Indian Philosophy. *N B Patil and Mrinal Kaul ‘Martand’.* Sant Samagam Research Institute, 37/4 Pandoka Colony, Paloura, Jammu 181121, and Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi 110007. 2003. xxviii + 387 pp. Rs 595.

Since 1953 Kashmir has gained a political mileage

due to the division of the Land of Paradise by the two powers of the Indian subcontinent. It is true that the frontiers of the earth are changing fast due to the rapid strides of science and technology. The day is not far away when we may try to reach other planets through inter-planetary communication. But do we not require a launching pad for our flights into infinity? Can we afford to lose the monumental work of our ancestors who have built up our tradition, culture and philosophy of eternal values? Looking around, are we not saddened to see the state of affairs even after fifty-eight years of independence? Long before we attained our political freedom, Swami Vivekananda gave his clarion call to the youth of our country to go to the masses and care for them in a spirit of worship. But today we are in the midst of a society where consumerism is rampant and almost everybody is fighting over trivialities, thereby bidding goodbye to all moral and spiritual values.

The book under review provides welcome relief in the context of the present situation. It is a Festschrift volume celebrating the life and work of a scholar and savant of Kashmir, Pandit Jankinath Kaul 'Kamal', who did remarkable work in the field of Kashmir Shaivism and Vedanta. Commemorative volumes are generally of very varied character and quality. So is the present volume. Some essays are collections of tributes to and reminiscences of the person honoured; other sections contain collections of articles on Indology (with a special chapter on Kashmir Shaivism) and spirituality by internationally renowned scholars, as well as by less known authors. So the content is uneven.

The reviewer, however, is doubtful about the merit of some essays that have found place in the book, especially the one on Bopadeva's contribution to the bhakti cult (which betrays a lack of seriousness) and another on Ramana Maharshi (which, though brief, draws freely from Osborne's book on Ramana and offers little that is the contributor's own).

In contrast, we have Dr Sarada Natarajan's illuminating and highly informative article on the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi. Dr Karan Singh's article 'Some Thoughts on Vedanta' is rich in suggestiveness. 'The Vedas,' he says, 'are like the Himalayas.' They have the majesty, the solidity, the grandeur and the stability of the Himalayas, and like the incalculable riches that flow from them in the form of perennial rivers, the great Upanishads

have flown from the Vedas down to the present day enriching the thought processes of the country. Dr Singh has rightly pointed out that the message of the Vedas and Vedanta have no room for sectarianism and communalism. Taken together, they provide a holistic paradigm and a global philosophy (*vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*) that can sustain us in this period of intense transition. Dr G Mishra's 'Jivanmukti and Jivanmukta', Dr C Rajendran's 'Influence of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Philosophy on Alāṅkāra-śāstra', Dr T Devarajan's 'Hermeneutics and Indian Poetics' and Dr N B Patil's 'Value Education for the New Millennium' are really excellent.

For all its unevenness of quality, the book is worth reading, cherishing as it does the memory of a most erudite Kashmiri pandit. Pandit Jankinath Kaul's interest in Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism are fully reflected and the editors deserve congratulations for the trouble they have taken to make the book comprehensive. A wide circulation of the book will give a new fillip to research-minded scholars on Indology, and Indian philosophy and religion.

Prof. Amalendu Chakraborty

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**Ātma Vidyā Vilāsam of Śrī Sadāśiva
Brahmendra Yogi.** Kalluri Suryanarayana.
Sankhyayana Vidya Parishat, 2-12-34
Annappurna Colony, Uppal, Hyderabad
500 039. 2003. 46 pp. Rs 36.

The book under review is a translation of the sixty-two verses on Self realization by Sri Sadashiva Brahmendra, a seventeenth-century yogi of South India. The verses throw light on the nature and essence of the Atman and on *atma-vidya*, which is obtained through the grace of a *sadguru* and through spiritual practice. The traits of a God-realized soul, the *jivanmukta*, have also been described.

The main text comprises the shlokas in Devanagari, followed by a word-for-word transliteration and translation in English. A brief biographical sketch of Sadashiva Brahmendra has also been provided by the translator.

Many typos and grammatical errors make the reading cumbrous, and call for more careful editing.

Dr C S Shah (late)
Aurangabad

Reports

In Memoriam

Special puja and bhandara were held at **Belur Math** on 7 May in memory of our late President Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj. Devotees thronged the Math in large numbers from the early hours of the day. Prasad was served to about 45,000 devotees. Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the memorial meeting held in the afternoon. An estimated 2,00,000 people visited Belur Math that day.



Swami Gokulanandaji, Swami Smarananandaji, Dr Manmohan Singh, Sri I K Gujral and Sri L K Advani at the memorial meeting

Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi, organized a public meeting in memory of Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj on 15 May presided over by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh. Swami Smarananandaji gave a welcome address. Sri I K Gujral, former Prime Minister, and Sri L K Advani, former Deputy Prime Minister, reminisced about their association with Revered Maharaj. The entire one-hour programme was telecast live on Doordarshan's national channel.

Speaking about Revered Maharaj, Sri Advani said: 'Whenever Maharaj talked about India, he used to speak about the unity of India. ... It had become a regular practice for prominent men, including prime ministers and other

national leaders, to go to him for inspiration and advice.' In his presidential address Dr Singh observed: 'Swamiji's scholarly essays helped millions of young people to imbibe the true values of all the great religions of this ancient and sacred land of India. Be it in Kerala or in Kolkata, in Hyderabad or in New Delhi or in Karachi, wherever Swamiji lived, he left behind several generations of enlightened people who have dedicated their lives to the service of man and the welfare of our people.'

News from Headquarters

Swami Smarananandaji visited Rourkela on 1 and 2 April 2005 in connection with the silver jubilee celebration of the foundation of the Sri Ramakrishna temple at an unaffiliated centre there.

News from Branch Centres

Sri Sudarshan Agrawal, Governor of Uttaranchal, participated in the annual celebration of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh**, on 3 April.

Srimat Swami Gitanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated a new charitable



The charitable dispensary and cottage-industry building at Kamarpukur

dispensary and a cottage-industry building at **Ramakrishna Mission, Kamarpukur**, on 13 April.

Sri Jaibeer Singh, Minister of State for Health, Uttar Pradesh, inaugurated a new in-

tensive-care unit at **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban**, on 16 April.

On the evening of 18 April, after handing over the keys to the **Dilaram Bungalow** (see 'Reports', June issue) to Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Sri



Swami Nikhileswaranandaji, Swami Atmasthanandaji and Sri Modi viewing the exhibition

Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat, inaugurated a permanent exhibition displaying 36 large-size photographs of Swami Vivekananda in the Bungalow premises.

Sri Pradeep Kumar, Minister for Human Resource Development, Jharkhand, visited **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi**, on 23 April and participated in a seminar on 'Education for Self-reliance and Character Building' organized by the centre.

Three students of the primary school run by **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Baranagore**, stood first in the state-level science quiz contest organized by Birla Industrial and Technical Museum, Kolkata, in April.

Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar, started a mobile medical service in Bath village near the town on 2 May. Sri C C Singpho, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Arunachal Pradesh, inaugurated the service.

Ramakrishna Math, Mumbai, concluded its celebration of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's 150th birth anniversary with a seminar, discussions, a japa-yajna, a spiritual retreat and cultural programmes from 20 to 22 May.

Relief and Rehabilitation

In the aftermath of two separate fire accidents that occurred in Bihar in June, two Ramakrishna Mission centres provided help to families whose houses were gutted by the fires. **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chapra**, distributed 157 saris, 30 dhotis, bamboo poles, galvanized tin sheets and large quantities of fodder among 97 families of Gautam Sthan and Naini villages of Chapra district; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Katihar**, distributed 265 kg rice, 53 kg dal, 265 kg flour, 106 kg *chira*, 264 kg *chhatu*, 106 kg salt, 27 kg mustard oil, 53 biscuit packets, 63 saris, 62 dhotis, 10 lungis, 53 mosquito nets, 53 packages of candles and matchboxes to 53 families in Katihar.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunji, distributed 100 blankets to the poor and needy people of nearby areas.

Under a 'Build Your Own House' scheme, **Ramakrishna Mission Calcutta Students' Home, Belgharia**, provided building materials for 52 houses to people rendered homeless by a recent storm in Nadia and North 24-Parganas districts.

Continuing their relief and rehabilitation work in tsunami stricken areas, **Ramakrishna Mission, Port Blair**, distributed 450 kg dal, 651 saris, 476 women's garments, 12 dhotis, 28 lungis, 1,040 shirts, 60 shorts, 70 vests, 284 children's garments and 36 bed sheets in nearby areas; and **Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, distributed 42,569 shirts received as donation among 33,440 people in Cuddalore, Kanchipuram, Nagapattinam and Tiruvallur districts, in May.

The Chennai centre also gave, during the same period, 24 mechanized boats, 14 sets of fishing nets, 2 bicycles and an unspecified number of wooden boards for house building in the above-mentioned areas. Besides these, it has undertaken to construct 104 houses in Cuddalore district and 40 houses and a school-cum-shelterhouse in Nagapattinam district.

The Batticaloa sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo**, provided 23 sewing machines to tsunami victims in and around the town.

‘Women’s Power!’

Let there be light—and may it spread everywhere! Out of 23,000 villages in Jharkhand, only 8,000 have electricity. On 30 January 2005 a village called Murungtoli increased the number of electrified villages in the newly formed state by one, thanks to the efforts of **Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium, Ranchi**.

Murungtoli is not too far away from Ranchi. Although other neighbouring villages were enjoying electricity, this particular village continued to languish in darkness. Four years ago the women of the village—most of them unlettered housewives with no independent source of income—came together to form the Jyoti Mahila Samity. Since the group’s formation, it has brought many social changes, albeit imperceptibly, with the active support of the Sanatorium. The Samity approached Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium to help them get electrical connections for their village. Taking up the work in right earnest, the centre with the help of Sri M Chandra Mohan, one of its devotees who is a retired officer of Heavy Engineering Corporation, Ranchi, finally succeeded in bringing electricity to the village. The success, however, was due in no small measure to the enterprise of Samity members.

A public meeting was arranged by the villagers to celebrate the arrival of electricity, and Swami Vimokshanandaji, Secretary of the Sanatorium, and Sri Chandra Mohan were invited to speak. In his speech, the swami underscored the importance of women’s groups like Jyoti Mahila Samity and appreciated their accomplishment—something which even the working men of the village had failed at. At the same time, he explained to the women how important it was for them to encourage their children to read good books and develop

good tendencies. Only then would the light of knowledge dispel the darkness of ignorance. The swami then distributed booklets containing the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, inspired by which some youths of the village came forward to help the Samity. Sri Chandra Mohan, who had gone to great pains to meet the officials of the electricity department and get the whole work done, advised the villagers to put the electricity to good use and pointed to the Samity as an example of unity for village development. Smt Anna Linda, President of the Jyoti Mahila Samity, narrated the struggle the group went through before achieving success. She heartily thanked Sri Chandra Mohan and Swami Vimokshanandaji, whose help and encouragement were vital to the Samity’s effort.

The Jyoti Mahila Samity draws inspiration from Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

Helping Hill Women

Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, observed Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi’s 150th birth anniversary by serving poor people, mostly girls and women, in neighbouring villages. Between October 2004 and March 2005 it provided sweaters, uniforms, shoes, notebooks and stipend worth Rs 34,290 to 273 students, of whom 196 were girls. It also gave goats to 67 families at a cost of Rs 68,000, sewing machines worth Rs 5,400 to 3 women, and distributed 500 kg rice, 200 kg dal, 200 kg flour and 184 blankets amounting to Rs 32,840. ~



Distribution of goats at a village near Mayavati